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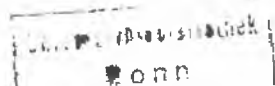
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for
Judith Milhous
and
Robert D. Hume

Acknowledgements

When I first gave a paper at the Modern Language Association on *Cosmicomics*, the Italianists frowned and insisted that my reading must be wrong because it contradicted Calvino's dark, nihilistic vision of the universe. Calvino's own response differed; he remarked on how sunny and optimistic he had been when he wrote those tales. His thoughtful and friendly letter encouraged me to feel that an outsider to Italian literature and Italian departments might none the less arrive at useful insights. I am grateful to him for that encouragement, since the dazzling power of his cosmicomical tales was a potent factor in my professional move from medieval to contemporary literature, and his fictions were my chief reason for learning Italian. I am very grateful also to Esther Calvino for hospitality in Rome during the azalea season; memories of magenta and white blossoms on the terrace mingle with the taste of rosemary chicken, roasted red and yellow peppers, and agretti. Several friends have offered advice on the manuscript and have challenged everything from reliance on vague terms like 'nature' to my applications of Greimas's semiotic square. I am grateful for such careful critiques from Jackson I. Cope, David Cowart, John T. Harwood, Peter Malekin, Daniel Punday, and Denis Walker. My thanks also to the Interlibrary Loan department of The Pennsylvania State University; its staff members were very successful in securing copies of some extremely out-of-the-way materials. Thanks also are due to Shama, Poons, and Rodos, without whose help this would have been finished sooner.

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A Note on Textual Practices

Deciding which texts to quote is no easy matter. *Le cosmicomiche* and *Ti con zero* for instance exist in three readily available versions: the long-standard Einaudi paperbacks, the new Garzanti paperbacks, and the Garzanti *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*. Furthermore, other cosmical stories appear in *La memoria del mondo*, a collection virtually unavailable outside of Italy. I decided to standardize upon *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* because it contains all but two of the stories from these three collections; the remaining two are cited from *La memoria del mondo*. Luckily, most Calvino stories are short, so readers can locate quotations even if the pages given differ from those in their own copies. The list of works by Italo Calvino cited or referred to in the bibliography gives the original date of publication for each text, and then the information on the version being used. When translations are given, they come from published sources (also listed) where those exist. English titles are used within my text, but publication dates refer to the Italian originals, never to the dates at which translations were issued, and are preceded by 'It.' where the reference might otherwise be ambiguous. Documenting by story title or volume name causes another bibliographic difficulty. For works with multiple editions, I prefer story title as being the more likely to lead the reader to the source. Story title also seems preferable when the units are more or less independent, as are the three tales in *Under the Jaguar Sun*. For works like *Mr. Palomar*, *Una pietra sopra*, *Collezione di sabbia*, and *Six Memos*, I have usually opted for volume name.

Introduction

At one end of the scale he observes the Big Bang; at the other, neutrinos. With him we gaze out along the sword blade of the sun's reflection, or in toward the teeming cities begotten on the mind by Marco Polo's *Travels*. He pierces surfaces, and under the familiar architecture of Ariosto, Shakespeare, and Goethe he uncovers a nightmare labyrinth of ambiguous iconic narremes. The Maze and the Gaze: in a word, the fictions of Italo Calvino.

If the notes playable on a piano represent the normal matter of twentieth-century fiction, Calvino's sonatas, fantasias, and variations-on-a-theme range far above and below the piano's octaves. The conventional expectations of many readers cause them to filter out the higher and lower frequencies. Confronting only those notes falling in the standard register, they question the validity and effectiveness of these compositions, and on occasion find them inadequate. Some would clearly prefer a symphony anyway.

Granted: Calvino seldom indulges us in the 'human angle'. Indeed he dreamily remarks upon seeing the preserved skin flayed from a young man,

I must admit I have never felt the attraction of viscera (just as I have never felt a strong urge to explore psychological interiors); hence perhaps my preference for this man who is all extension, unfolded in all his surface, precluding any thickness, any concealed motives. ('Looking at Dr. Spitzner's Waxworks', 528)

Devo ammettere che non ho mai sentito l'attrattiva delle viscere (così come non ho mai sentito una forte spinta a esplorare l'interiorità psicologica); da ciò forse la mia preferenza per quest'uomo tutto in estensione, spiegato in tutta la sua superficie, escludente ogni spessore e ogni intenzione riposta. (*Collezione di sabbia*, 33)

It follows that interactions between his characters are usually minimal and stylized.

Granted also: he ignores conventional tragedy, heroism, and romantic love. His protagonists seethe with desire but attain few satisfactory relationships or goals. Anguish nobly endured, intense spirituality, penetrating social vision—normal attributes of novelistic greatness—would seem disquietingly implausible in these reserved yet kaleidoscopic fictions. As a result, critics on both sides of the Atlantic temper their enthusiasm with reservations that the fictions seem cerebral, enamoured of pattern, and emotionally frigid.¹ Metafictional games-

¹ Such criticisms are usually voiced with a certain hesitation, but see the following pieces for a representative selection of such objections: Almansì (1971) in passing, regarding the

playing, amusing but ultimately not serious—this about sums up the standard, half-masked reaction, half-masked because even those with reservations recognize that what Calvino does, he does superbly.

These objections would be unassailable were Calvino sculpting human anguish into beauty, dissecting the carnage of capitalism, or exalting Partisan heroics. Nothing in his novels suggests that these were his intentions. We have to a degree been asking the wrong questions, however natural these questions seemed within the Italian literary and political context of Calvino's early publications and interests. This present book poses different questions about the nature of Calvino's endeavour, and attempts to delineate his implicit assumptions about mind and matter. With these as background, we can hope to find a more compelling way of discussing what the texts actually do—or more modestly some part of what they do. Much of their charm derives from the way their lively expressiveness lends itself to various literary, theoretical, philosophical, and historical interpretations.

Most of the extended critical studies to date start with *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* and search for logical lines of evolution from Partisan neo-realism to the varied historical fantasies of *Our Ancestors*. Their authors fret over the wavering between fantasy and realism in works such as *Marcovaldo*, obviously feeling that realism is the more important impulse artistically and politically. After strangeness becomes a permanent feature of the fiction, as it does from *Cosmicomics* on, they try to make sense of the bizarre progression through imaginary cities, tarot cards, and literary fragments to that human optic, Palomar. The problems addressed by this evolutionary line of investigation are (a) the disappearance of overt engagement; (b) the debatable morality of devoting one's talent to the service of fantasy; and (c) the human value of intensely cerebral metafictional games. Curiously, so far, such chronological accounts provide us with little sense of how Calvino developed as a thinker, how the problems he set himself changed or amplified. The later works suffer because they either run together under the rubric of intellectual geometry or within that grouping seem randomly different.

The present study is emphatically non-chronological. It concentrates on the fantastic structures underlying Calvino's imagination. Repeatedly these manifest themselves as a Cartesian cogito pitted against some form of cosmos in flux. Cosmos is a key term here, for it applies to Calvino's intense, symbolic fictions even when his setting is not the sidereal universe. This highly individual 'cosmic vision' achieved nearly final form in the cosmicomical tales. Prior to *Cosmicomics* its images and assumptions are present as pieces of a puzzle not yet assembled and partly disguised as a quest for authenticity. Once the vision snaps into

version of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* in Tarocchi; Baldini, Bruscagli, Davies, Gardner (1977), Thomson, and Updike.

focus, however, it makes its presence felt thereafter in genre, style, the questions each fiction asks, and the answers considered. Other writers scrutinize the individual's relationship to family or society, but Calvino's concerns extend beyond such parochial limits. For him consciousness confronts more ambitious meaning-structures: the scientific cosmos, literature, symbols, knowledge, and the observation process.

This study rests on three assumptions not always acceptable to Calvino's early audiences. One is that fantasy is an entirely legitimate mode for exploring any sort of idea, weighty or frivolous. Not surprisingly World War II made many old forms of fantasy temporarily unacceptable, but postmodernist literature has spawned new forms. Elaboration in a symbolic vein does not diminish the importance of ideas and questions or the potential seriousness of any answers.

Arising from this is the second assumption, namely that if fantasy need not trivialize a work's concerns, then it need not preclude moral seriousness. Some critics would deny this principle. Hence the stalemate in Italian criticism over Calvino's engagement. Incompatible premisses prevent agreement on the nature of the author's commitment to social issues, and assessments of the fictions differ accordingly. Calvino's lack of overt engagement does not bother me. Despite disagreeing over the value of the fiction, however, I admire the more politicized critiques for articulating the limitations of Calvino's enterprise.

My third assumption is that realism and fantasy are not competing forces, clashing like good and bad angels for the author's soul, with fantasy challenging and ultimately expelling realism. The centrality of fantasy, even in the apparently realistic early stories, has been cogently argued in Albert Howard Carter's *Italo Calvino: Metamorphoses of Fantasy*. His insights elegantly nullify the developmentalist projection of an originary, purely realistic artist. Calvino may well have had difficulty meshing these two primal impulses of fiction—imitation of, and departure from, reality—and he tries very different balances between the two, but both are usually present, and fantasy is not just a belated and degenerate interloper.

Recognizing two other elements of Calvino's enterprise can improve our grasp of its outline. One is his essentially philosophical concern with the Cartesian cogito facing the material universe. Calvino's fictions rely far more heavily on ideas than on action or character, but criticism has very few tools for discussing such fictions. The other is his love of pattern and form. In resurrecting 'fabulator', Robert Scholes could have had Calvino in mind. Scholes derives the characteristics of the breed from the Latin fable, *De rege et fabulatore suo*. 'Delight in design, and its concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer, will serve in part to distinguish the art of the fabulator from the work of the novelist or the satirist. Of all narrative forms, fabulation puts the highest premium on art

and joy.' (1979: 3) Such creative, ornamental pleasure is typical of Calvino's work, and it harmonizes with the goal of inward civilization that he seems to have been developing toward the end of his career.

The first part of this study will establish some premisses. Chapter 1 examines the questions critics have asked and the assumptions they have made. We will then see what a few suitable approaches can reveal when applied to a recent story, 'Under the Jaguar Sun'. Bludgeoning predecessors is not my aim. Most commentary on Calvino is at least interesting, and even when I disagree—as I do, say, over the notion that the juvenility of several early narrators indicates a permanent immaturity on Calvino's part—I admit that certain standard assumptions might lead one to that conclusion. Instead, I try to create space for new possibilities.

Chapter 2 presents what I call the constant core in Calvino's work, the fantastic structures of his imagination. These generate certain cosmological images, they embed emotions in the material substances of this world, and they contribute to the philosophical element in his enquiries. The principal evidence for these arguments derives from the cosmicomic tales, so they will provide the chief illustrations. However, a cluster of metaphors exfoliate from the themes of particle and paste, and these transformations are illustrated from *Invisible Cities*, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, and *Mr. Palomar*.

The next four chapters focus on the works, starting with the cosmicomic stories in Chapter 3. I admit the difficulties of discussing middle narratives before earlier efforts; however, this placement openly declares my practice, which involves reading the prior fictions through this controlling 'filter', the metaphysical clarification that took place in *Cosmicomics*.

Chapter 4 concerns the fictions written prior to this Big Bang, from *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* to *The Watcher* and the revisions of *Marcivaldo*. These fictions clump together thematically but not chronologically, each set defined by the problem it tackles. This chapter will also call attention to the different forms taken by the cosmic images of particle and paste in these prior works, and to the curious patina given the earlier images by their more overt sexualization.

Chapters 5 and 6 will examine the later novels, again in logical rather than chronological pairs: *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* with *If on a winter's night a traveler*; *Invisible Cities* with *Mr. Palomar*. The former two both ask questions about literature, the latter two investigate the acts of observation and the construction of mental models. All four novels present conclusions about 'attitude' and 'inward civilization' that seem important as answers to the questions asked by these works. One might call them answers Calvino was least dissatisfied with, for clearly he had neither arrived at sudden illumination nor sold out to conventional pieties when death severed him from his creations. In essence, I shall argue that

he was exploring attitude as the proper concern of consciousness, and inward civilization as its proper state. As foil to the previous focus on constant core, the final chapter will analyse differences between works by using A. J. Greimas's semiotic square to elucidate developments and changes, and will finish with an analysis of Calvino's emerging, though still implicit, concept of inward civilization.

Calvino's tone poses special problems for the critic. Mercurial, half detached but half involved, serious but never ponderous, ironically flirtatious, hilarious, desperate—the articulation of this voice is a marvellous stylistic balancing act; its extremes would generate enormous tension in readers did Calvino not make everything seem so easy. Finding an answerable voice with which to discuss his creations is correspondingly difficult. The usual academic 'Filboid Stodge' exposes its own gracelessness in such a context, yet scholarship necessarily travels with some stylistic baggage.

Courtesy and practicality require quotations in both English and Italian; because this book is written in English, I have used English titles and quoted English translations in the text, but I have followed these with the original Italian in each case. The editions cited, both English and Italian, are listed in the bibliography. Complete bibliographical information for secondary materials appears only in the appropriate section of the bibliography; this permits me to refer to critics by name alone and avoid huge footnotes, which would stiffly incrust what ought to be flexible discussions.

Again and again in the course of this study, we will return to the matter of my subtitle, *cogito* and *cosmos*. Calvino's writing is haunted by the Cartesian *cogito*, its thoughts and observations being almost always his point of departure. His gaze sometimes resembles that of a scientist: he observes patiently, often passive and bodiless, and does not persuade himself that he sees some transcendent reality or that his model accounts for phenomena it does not. Scientists look for similarities. A new species becomes meaningful when its closest kin have been identified through taxonomic comparison. Should a nova transgress established patterns it causes much alarm and questioning of data; a second nova following the freakish pattern would be greeted with relief and acceptance. Resemblance in and of itself establishes or confirms meaning. As we shall see, likeness has special functions in Calvino's metaphysic and is central to his use of the cosmos as image.

Where Calvino departs from scientific attitudes is in his preference for the likenesses he himself can create between greatly disparate entities, or for the differences he finds embedded in apparently identical entities. Whereas the scientist tries to tame the cosmos by reducing it, Calvino enriches and complicates it. He equates making *tagliatelle* and making the universe; he takes a single tarot card and endows it with four entirely

different narrative significations; he explores ideas reversibly (colours bring eyes into existence, or vice versa). Calvino understands the scientist's joy of discovering pattern. However, the limitations of this kind of meaning are obvious to Calvino, because he observes the human imagination as well as external data. He knows that we create such meanings. Calvino's own imagination batters on likenesses, and he uses them in his picture of how one might find at least a limited, individual sense of fitting into the universe—but he does not proclaim this solution as final answer to his questions. Calvino looks for patterns and symmetries, he creates them, and explores their power, but ultimately seems to have been unable to find lasting satisfaction with any.

If we go beyond science, and beyond all the other webs we have woven to create meaning, what remains? It is toward this far horizon of thought that Calvino aimed his intellect. His fictions record this quest.

The Garden of Forking Paths: Exploratory Fictions

You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don't recognize it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone? On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself.

(If on a winter's night a traveler, 9)

Ti prepari a riconoscere l'inconfondibile accento dell'autore. No. Non lo riconosci affatto. Ma, a pensarci bene, chi ha mai detto che questo autore ha un accento inconfondibile? Anzi, si sa che è un autore che cambia molto da libro a libro. E proprio in questi cambiamenti si riconosce che è lui.

(Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore, 9)

With characteristic precision, Calvino defines our problem. The tone is unmistakable yet completely different in each book. Perhaps wisdom lies in recognizing this as a mystery to be acknowledged with silence, but if not, then we must come to terms with an *œuvre* touched by Ovidian magic. Exterior forms change, but something hard to define remains stable.

Because the fiction itself thus points in two directions, criticism on Calvino is bound to alternate between valuing the differences and redefining the constant core. To date, most critics have been drawn by the everchanging iridescent surfaces, by the novelty embodied in each subsequent creation. The present study seeks to balance such insights, first by arguing that a stable core indeed exists, and second by articulating that centre in terms of a metaphysic and an authorial quest.

The rest of this chapter will lay the groundwork for that argument. First comes a brief description of Calvino's life for those readers who know him only through his fiction. Then follows an analysis of the questions critics have asked in their approaches to the works. Such a problem-oriented analysis seems to me more interesting and potentially more useful than a straight survey of previous criticism. The last two sections of the chapter will leave such abstractions behind to examine one of Calvino's finest stories 'Under the Jaguar Sun'. In this double reading, I

wish first to analyse the story in conventional terms—hero monomyth, Calvino's canon, and psychological images. I shall then try to illustrate what my study of Calvino's metaphysic can do to identify the common core and the 'accento inconfondibile', the unmistakable tone.

Calvino's Career

Italianists can gather information about the man, editor, and public figure from Bonura and from newspaper profiles not readily available outside Italy. English speakers have few sources and those are hard to come by; Carter's biographical sketch is the most detailed so far. In merging publications with shifts in life and work, I mean to suggest some of the complexities out of which these very different works appear. My own readings are strictly literary, but obviously Calvino's professional work as editor, his political commitments, and his career as essayist and debater in ongoing arguments about the proper nature of literature—all deserve attention. The last in particular needs a book to itself, but this is not that book.¹

Little wonder that successive stages in Calvino's writings have attracted their own adherents; a summary of his publications and activities reveals what looks like the work of several men.

He was born in 1923 in Cuba, where both his parents were working as agronomists. They returned soon to Italy, and he grew up in San Remo, enjoying the attractions of the resort town more than those of his father's experimental farm. Since the entire family of his parents' generation were scientists, he lived in a free-thinking enclave, and received no religious training. Bowing to family expectations, he started to study agriculture at the university, but war and the German occupation freed him from that duty and drove him into the ranks of the Partisans. After the war, he got his degree in literature with a thesis on Conrad in 1947, and the same year launched his career as writer with a war novel, welcomed for its simple neo-realist prose, its unromantic portrayal of Partisan struggles, and the demonic but curiously appealing urchin, Pin. Even without the later fictions, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* and short stories such as 'The Crow Comes Last' would have established Calvino in Italian literature because they expressed with refreshing lucidity the war experience of his generation.

¹ Helpful discussions of some of these debates, with analyses of how and why Calvino's fiction gets caught in the crossfire, occur in Barilli (1989), Capozzi, Falaschi (1988), and Marighetti; in the introduction to Olken's book; in Pescio Bottino, and Spinazzola. Because these critics look back across time, they clarify issues in a fashion often lacking in the original argumentative essays. Bonura and Di Carlo chart reception for Calvino's individual works, and this too helps place him in context. Calvino makes clear what some of the issues looked like to him in 'Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura' (1976) in *Una pietra sopra*, translated as 'Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature' in *The Uses of Literature*.

Then, in 1952, without warning, *The Cloven Viscount*—a fantastic fable in which war is mocked with a shudder, and the survivor is split up the middle into two halves, one vicious and one repellantly righteous. Reintegration of body, psyche, and society occurs, but part of the price amounts to acceptance of traditional marriage patterns and social structures. The possible political allegory in this unrevolutionary conclusion seems contradicted by *The Argentine Ant*, published in the same year, which shows no compromise in the earnest struggle of a young couple against an unceasing oppression. More short stories follow, and then, another apparent discontinuity: the great collection of Italian folk-tales (It. 1956). During this period, he worked for the Einaudi publishing house, wrote rousing literary-political essays, and left the Communist Party in 1957.² The extreme compression of that last sentence is deliberate, a frustrated flourish meant to call attention to Calvino's many interests and our present lack of a serious biography.

In *The Baron in the Trees* (It. 1957) the decades of Enlightenment, Revolution, and Restoration hazily parallel the rise and fall of Communist hopes during the war and post-war period; against this background, Calvino sympathetically portrays an eccentric individual determined to go his separate way, however strange and impractical that way may appear. Several of the following, including *A Plunge into Real Estate* (It. 1957), *I racconti* (1958), and *The Watcher* (It. 1963), exhibit disenchanting views of post-war society and its values. During this period, Calvino collaborated with Elio Vittorini in the editing of *Il menabò di letteratura*, contributing essays on the problems confronting literature in the industrialized society.

With *Cosmicomics* (It. 1965), science explodes his previous horizons, and following science come other theoretical forms of thinking. Structuralism, semiotics, and deconstruction influence the repetitious building blocks and empty centres of *Invisible Cities* (It. 1972) and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (longer version, It. 1973). Theory is occasionally set aside for spin-off collections of folk-tales and a children's book based on a tale in Ariosto (*Il gigante orripilante*). It reappears in the metafiction of *If on a winter's night a traveler* (It. 1979). The year 1980 sees the major essays of the past decades collected in *Una pietra sopra*. In 1983, *Mr. Palomar* comes out and in 1984, we get journalistic meditations (*Collezione di sabbia*). Stories focusing on the senses appear posthu-

² Though hardly a detailed account of his work at Einaudi, that produced by Franco Lucentini is a welcome beginning. For the first major attempt to deal with Calvino's periodical essays, see Gian Carlo Ferretti (1988, 1989). This material is so relatively difficult to trace and collect that mistakes are inevitable at this stage. Signora Calvino tells me that a significant number of the essays mentioned in Ferretti's book are not by Calvino but by someone else whose initials were also 'I. C.' Falaschi (1972) offers a useful bibliography of early journalism by Calvino. See also Hume (1992a).

mously in *Under the Jaguar Sun* (It. 1986). This sketch of his publications is by no means complete.

In 1964, Calvino married Esther ('Chichita') Singer, a multilingual Argentinian who was a translator of technical materials for UNESCO and who was and is an insatiable reader—like Ludmilla in *If on a winter's night a traveler* and like Calvino himself. They lived in Paris, where their daughter, Giovanna, was born. He became a member of OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle), the avant-garde 'workshop' of writers and mathematicians. In 1980, he returned to Italy, settling in Rome. For much of his career, he continued working for Einaudi. When he died, he was struggling to compose his talks for the Norton Lecture series at Harvard University, subsequently published as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* and *Lezioni americane* (1988).

Man of the left, war writer, essayist, social critic: Calvino was all of these. Then too, he was a symbolic writer, a fictional practitioner of avant-garde theory, and friend and encourager of others developing the avant-garde in other arts.³ In the business world, he was a successful, hard-working editor and director for a major publishing concern with an international list. He was also an ironist, a close observer of the moments experienced by an alienated mind, and an explorer of abstract desires.

This survey does no justice to the way Calvino reanimates the tradition of Italian literature for the post-war age. Not only does he 'recycle' Marco Polo, Ariosto, Galileo, and folk-tales in his own stories, he also edited a condensed version of Ariosto and encouraged other such projects to make the classics more accessible to a popular audience.⁴ Such a summary makes little attempt to see where apparent fantasy has political dimensions, or apparently political works have fantastic dimensions, or where science is vehicle for metafictional discussion of literature. It passes over shifts in perspective: some of the works have adolescent protagonists; others figure riper spirits who look at experience from far beyond the appetites and initiation rituals of the first half of life. Discontinuities are more apparent than stable core.

³ Umberto Eco calls attention to Calvino's having encouraged his writing on the 'open work', and mentions Calvino's friendship with advanced musicians such as Maderna, Boulez, and Berio. *Collezione di sabbia* bears witness to Calvino's curiosity concerning strange kinds of painting, and he occasionally wrote pieces specially inspired by art, such as his 'Il crollo del tempo' on Steinberg, and 'Quattro favole in cornice'. For further discussion of his interaction with contemporary art, see Leube and Ricci (1989).

⁴ De Lauretis: 'the Resistance created a new national heritage. . . . Yet, the real task of Calvino was to recuperate and integrate with the new culture a great literary and popular tradition dating back to the Middle Ages—a task all the more difficult since it carried the danger of being misunderstood by both sides of the political barricade' (1975: 414). Spinazzola sees as Calvino's deepest commitment the determination to maintain a living dialogue with a popular, not just an élite, audience (1987: 510). Woodhouse (1989) describes in greater detail Calvino's popularizing of Ariosto through radio and through his edition, and puts his efforts into the context of other such enterprises.

Interrogating the Texts

The questions critics ask cannot be reduced to a list of mutually exclusive concerns; the approaches to be discussed simply reflect the clumping of critical matter, issues on which controversies or enthusiasms have accumulated. Various kinds of theorists are identifiable by their concern with authorial engagement or with semiotics, narratology, and deconstruction. Traditional critics investigate genre and form and style. Numerous studies focus on a few texts and describe themes, philosophy, or erotics. A few have tried to deal with the corpus as a whole, some with chronological survey, and others thematically in terms of psychological images or use of fantasy. I cannot reduce the arbitrariness of these divisions any further, so I shall pass on to what interests me, namely the questions asked in each and the contributions that each approach can make to our understanding of Calvino.

One approach fundamentally challenges what Calvino seems to be trying to do. This can be done on aesthetic grounds—what neo-realism should be and do, how fiction should represent reality, and whether event generates word or vice versa.⁵ Some of the original readers specifically dislike his penchant for fantasy. Many build their challenge on political grounds and reprove what they see as social irresponsibility, alienation, and nostalgia.⁶ Others reject on humanistic grounds what seems to them an inhuman cerebrality and sterile games-playing. Cesare Cases (1974a) in his turn chides a few such reviewers of *Invisible Cities* by inventing a few invisible cities of his own. The inhabitants of 'Populonia', for instance, are said to reject Calvino for showing today's world of multi-laned circumferential highways as eternal and unchanging.⁷ The critics being called Populonians, and those challenging Calvino's contribution to the mission of neo-realism are asking the following sorts of questions:

⁵ Among the critics who focus on the interrelations of fantasy and reality are Annoni, Battaglia, De Lauretis (1978), De Mara, Falaschi (1971, 1976), Guglielmi, Manacorda (1967), Ricci (1986), Pautasso (1973b), and Woodhouse (1970). Lucente (1986) shows how Calvino ultimately denies either word or event as unique source of discourse (p. 283). For a strong Marxist defence of Calvino, see Andrea Bisicchia (1973), who claims that the true challenge to the labyrinth is not realism but the imagination and its literature.

⁶ Among the many critics who express reservations about Calvino's fictions in the context of what literature should do, one finds every shade of feeling from slight disagreements to systematic rejections. A complete list would have to draw on newspaper commentary, most of which is not recorded by bibliographies, but critiques and discussions appearing mostly in periodical articles include those by the following authors: Baldini, Barilli (1989), Bruscagli, De Tomasso, Garboli, Gatt-Rutter, Marabini, Patuzzi, Pautasso (1973a), Pedullà (1968), Perroud, and Petroni.

⁷ In this satire Calvino is also driven out of 'Cabala', city of the literary avant-garde ruled by Cortázar and Borges, because he admits that 'things' exist outside of 'text'. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, who are discussing the reception of this novel, sensibly conclude that Calvino should have a city of his own within the Khan's empire, even if he is its only inhabitant.

'What does this piece of literature do to improve literature, the political outlook, or the human condition in Italy or the world?'

Grant their premisses, and their conclusions follow. They assume that play, when unallied to satire, is weak stuff (Gatt-Rutter), and that fantasy, disengagement, and alienation are self-indulgent. Calvino's later novels and essays elicit forthright disgust at talent gone wrong, at triviality and aridity and terminal alienation (e.g. Baldini, Brusagli), or delicate regret at excessive cerebrality (Gardner 1977).

I am more interested in what Calvino did than what he failed to do, but agree that such challengers are very acute concerning significant limitations in Calvino's subjects and sympathies. Calvino was unwilling to think about humanity in large numbers. He rarely portrays society in any complexity. Furthermore, he does lack a 'human' emotional dimension in his work, particularly in the later novels. I would argue in reply that he was not starting from the premisses that nourish such concerns. Put simply, he does not define humankind as social or political animal. He pushes further back in our needs to our awareness of self and defines humans in terms of consciousness. Numerous readers, particularly those from beyond the original audience and circumstances of production, are prepared to see what this premiss may lead to. They are interested in the philosophical, as opposed to the historical or Italian, Calvino. Such readers naturally ask different questions of the fiction.

One such group of critics, less frustrated by the texts but no less limited in perspective, focuses on the 'Parisian' Calvino and asks one of two questions: 'How does contemporary critical theory illuminate these texts?' or 'How do these texts illuminate contemporary critical theory?' The mating of later novels to theory is happily productive. Calvino was acquainted with the French and Italian leading edge. He often knew the theorists themselves, and certainly read or knew about the works of Roland Barthes, A. J. Greimas, and other structuralists and narratologists; the semiotic work of Umberto Eco; the manifestos and articles of Gruppo '63 and the *Tel Quel* circle; and the deconstructive quest of Derrida. Readers who see *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* as exploring and illustrating Saussure's theories of the arbitrariness of the sign, for instance, can feel assured that the basic terms of their investigation are relevant.⁸

Regrettably, relevance does not guarantee wide-ranging implications. Such critics certainly prove that Calvino was attuned to contemporary theory. His tarot cards illustrate narratological arguments, his serial cities show art as combinatory play, and his refusal to affirm presence or centre can be deemed deconstructive. Indeed, after illustrating his

⁸ Selected critics who focus on Calvino as theorist include Badley, Biasin (1978), Cannon (1979-80), Catalano, De Lauretis (1978), Green, James (1982), Lavagetto (1980), Lucente (1983), Motte (1986b), and Pedullà (1972).

ongoing concern with the latest issues throughout his entire career, Olga Ragusa wonders how well such art will last, given its relentless attachment to whatever was modish at the time of writing. The structuralist, semiotic, and deconstructive readings enrich our understanding of single works, particularly the later novels, but they have done relatively little to help us see Calvino's work as a whole. Practitioners of this sort do not demand psychologically profound characters or overt political engagement; to that extent, they respond to the works on the works' own terms. We might wonder, though, whether Calvino sat down and wrote because he wanted to illustrate contemporary literary theory. Would that goal have driven him to compose and polish day after day, month after month?

Theoretical readings have enriched our responses to individual works. De Lauretis on the semiotics of *Invisible Cities* or Salvatori on *If on a winter's night a traveler*, to name but two, augment our reactions to those texts through their use of Eco, Jury Lotman, Freud (De Lauretis 1978) and Gadamer (Salvatori 1986). Clearly, aesthetic, political and theoretical issues did animate Calvino at times or in certain contexts—yet one asks whether there is no more general an impulse behind the works, and if there is, what it might be?

Traditional questions of genre and form get us no closer to a general impulse, and have proved more successful on individual novels than the whole corpus. Calvino's ironies have been linked to Bakhtinian carnival and repression. Good preliminary work has been done on the elements in some of the texts that make them Mannerist (the latter characterized as fascination with Asiaticism, maze and mage images, irregularity, fantasy, and ambiguity).⁹ Several critics have noted his displaced hero monomyths, and his related practice of recycling folk-tales.¹⁰ The pastoral, myth, the *Bildungsroman*, and fantasy provide other generic influences and models.¹¹ One can even uncover regional roots and study the 'Ligurian' Calvino.¹² Much might be done along lines such as these. Putting the Mannerist elements of his fiction into some kind of historical and literary perspective would be well worth the effort. So would an extended study of his continued experiments with attenuated monomyth structures.

Issues of style have always fascinated some of Calvino's readers. His passionate but very calm virtuosity, the cheerfully heterogeneous registers of vocabulary, his deadpan refusal to reflect excitement at emotional drama, and his taste for undercutting sophisticated subject matter with

⁹ For the link to Bakhtin, see Adler (1986); for Mannerism, see Cipolla and Del Giudice.

¹⁰ For the monomyth, see Markey (1983, 1986), Milanini (1990), and Orr; for folk-tales, see Woodhouse (1970, 1989).

¹¹ On pastoral, see Cannon (1978); on myth, see Hume (1984), Milanini (1990), and Heiney (1971); on *Bildungsroman* see Bouissy, Di Felice, and Luca Fontana (1985). For comments on his fantastic mode of writing, see Carter, Gioanola, and Ghidetti.

¹² See Citate, Ferrua, and Nocentini.

limpid, childlike repetitions are all potential foci for such studies.¹³ Single works have benefited from such analyses, but stylistic studies mostly concentrate on individuality and on separate works. Particularly for an author whose concerns and tone and style change so much, a stylistic study would strain to encompass the entire corpus and offer general observations. Furthermore, unless the critic happens to be hostile, and uses something like the immature narrators to criticize Calvino's outlook, few readers have asked what his use of various forms might mean. 'Why does he mingle linguistic registers?' 'Why is the tone so light?' They are mostly asking 'How does Calvino sound?' or 'What forms does he use?' but not 'Why?' or 'How do these fit into a larger picture?'

Other interpretations focus on a single work or a nexus of closely related works, such as the trilogy, and they might be loosely labelled thematic readings. They make us aware of images or concepts present in those particular works. Some explore his 'erotics', the use of male and female projections of self—*Bradamante* and *Ludmilla* both figuring as authorial symbols, for instance.¹⁴ Elements of Calvino's philosophy—as present in a specific text—always attract attention. Critics trace lines of tension between his geometries and his rejection of determinism. They explore his attitudes toward cities, industrialization, mechanization, and personal happiness. They note his attraction to constant movement, his fascination with how obsessions give people a sense of meaning. They meditate upon how he portrays desire as the motive force in history.¹⁵ In general, these interrogate the texts for scraps of Calvino's philosophy.

Oddly little has been done to analyse the psychological substrates, yet one would expect to find a personal pattern as characteristic as a fingerprint present throughout his work. Again, though, the critical impulse has addressed itself to single works or small groups. Castration anxieties, oral aggression, and unresolved Oedipal problems have been shown to be richly present in *Our Ancestors*, but little equivalent analysis has been applied to later works. Lacan has been invoked with regard to the mirror images in *Invisible Cities*, but only in passing.¹⁶ These

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¹⁶ Falaschi (1972), Bouissy, Malmgren, Migiel, and Sanguinetti Katz deal with such early stage Freudian anxieties. James (1986) and Pedullà (1972) invoke Lacan.

disparate flashes of insight remain undeveloped, partly because the critics shy away from the implicit question: 'What do his works tell us about the mind of the author?' So eager are they to avoid this query that they overlook a much less risky question: 'How do these charged images illuminate the works?' Analysis of the author may be unpopular and the results perhaps immaterial, but exploring the images might sensitize us to tensions in the works. The presence of so much desire and the variations worked by its sublimations ought to yield insights.

By far the most extensive effort to use some of these intense, repeated images is that of Aurore Frasson-Marin (1986), who draws on psychological and anthropological concepts to describe the symbolism of Calvino's works up to but not including *Mr. Palomar*. She investigates spatialized images (up and down, horizontal and vertical); schizomorphic divisions and oppositions; synthetic and dialectic structures; and Jungian archetypal patterns of the nocturnal/feminine, the diurnal/masculine, and the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This brief description does little justice to her system of image-complexes, based variously on the work of Gilbert Durand, C. G. Jung, and André Virel. In her book, though, we find an effort to look at the career as a whole, an attempt to find, if not a common core, then at least a set of core elements that combine and permute to account in some fashion for the Calvinian imagination. Although my own starting point and results are different, I find this one of the most stimulating studies to date.

Similar in aim to Frasson-Marin but far less detailed are the studies that highlight some sort of core present in a sizeable portion of Calvino's corpus. Most of these are articles, and their authors usually just note that the stories under review contain such-and-such a theme, or that 'X' is very important to Calvino in general, whatever their particular 'X' may be. In other words, these are not detailed and systematic attempts to establish central concerns and their authors might well not try to extend their insights to all of Calvino's output, so I am over-simplifying here by treating such comments as if they were developed arguments, but they do have the potential for applying to all his work.

One might subdivide these studies into four groups. Those critics who find philosophy fundamental to this fiction variously analyse such issues as the disorder at the heart of every order, the existential attitudes and choices of Calvino characters, and Calvino's concern with happiness or with human activity as both praxis and poesis.¹⁷ Another group orients itself toward the relationships Calvino creates with his audience.¹⁸ Yet

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another consists of critics whose approaches are *sui generis* so far: Grigg, that Calvino seeks the God behind God behind God (a concept meaningful to philosophical theologians), and Cardona, who charts Calvino's projections of self into his characters. Finally, some critics allude from various angles to the nexus of values that most concerns me. It may take the form of consciousness and cosmos, or individual and community, or the One and the Many. The writers may focus on alienation and separation, or on integration, or on dissolution into the flux. Both positive and negative interpretations of the individual's merging with the many are offered.¹⁹

So what do I propose to offer that differs from these approaches? I shall ask, 'What is the nature of Calvino's literary enterprise?' The answer, in brief, is that most of his works show a Cartesian cogito facing the cosmos. That cosmos takes two basic forms, one consisting of particles, the other, of undifferentiable flux. The particles, or minimal units, range from neutrinos to grosser entities—sounds, cities, people, symbols—and may be assimilated through any available sense. The cogito generally approaches the cosmos in an exploratory frame of mind; conquest, possession, and use sometimes manifest themselves in erotic form but rarely in terms of power-politics or material gain. Knowledge usually would suffice to satisfy the cogito's desires. This Calvinian cogito is concerned to respond adequately to the complexity of the stimuli. It seeks to cultivate an attitude able to cherish the contradictory implications, able to register the absences as well as the presences, able to assimilate the flat and dry as well as the dramatic or ecstatic. In the long run, Calvino's focus on attitude leads him to urge certain kinds of self-construction, the building of inward civilization. Before he can encourage this stance, however, he has to face some of his own anxieties. Predictably, facing the cosmos is risky. Dissolution into the flux is one—perhaps *the*—logical outcome, and it constitutes both a terror and a temptation. The evidence supporting this delineation of the Calvinian metaphysic is to be found in the next chapter.

The foregoing description should give a sense of the approaches that

and a means of liberation to readers; Spinazzola insists on Calvino's determination to maintain colloquy with a popular readership, and Stille points to his concern that readers enjoy themselves.

¹⁹ See Amoruso (integration of man and world, and alienation); Baudrillard (alienation); De Lauretis (1976) (the oppositions of I and not-I or individual and group as dialectic process in the fictions); Mazza (world vs. implacable observer); Pautasso (1973a) (Calvino seeks a concept of man and a vision of the world); Raffa (self and objects); all Ricci's articles (1982, 1984, 1986) (alienation); Schulz-Buschhaus (1978) who invokes the Nietzschean and Gramscian 'pessimism of intellect and optimism of will', a descriptor of Calvino that links closely to his distrust of society and fellow humans (hence the pessimism); Varese (evading totality); Vidal (1985) (the One and the Many); and Woodhouse (1968b, 1970) (alienation).

have been tried on Calvino's fiction. At this juncture, I would like to abandon the unavoidable dryness of such metacriticism and turn to one of Calvino's most intense, sensual, and complex stories. Exploring genre, canon, and psychological symbolism, I shall strive to make the basic concerns of this story vivid, and indicate the ways in which it resembles and differs from Calvino's other creations. Then I will sketch Calvino's underlying metaphysic, and show how knowledge of this constant core changes our understanding. My aim is not to proclaim one path to enjoying Calvino as superior, but to show how various ways of thinking through his work can complement each other, and how they uncover different kinds of fictional concerns and structures.

Exploring the Realm of the Jaguar Sun

'Under the Jaguar Sun' is a late story, first published in 1982, and not yet much commented upon.²⁰ It was to have been one of five stories devoted to the five senses. The unnamed narrator and Olivia are travelling in Mexico, seeing the ruins of ancient cultures and eating the spicy food. The sense of taste informs this story, and Calvino's brilliant ability to talk intriguingly about flavours makes one regret that he did not write about food more often. Culinary description is a highly specialized and surprisingly difficult art. Calvino's adaptation of symbolic language to the task immediately differentiates his contribution to this genre from the usual attempts at transcription, and by investing a minor form with new glory, Calvino enriches the texture of his fiction.

If I had known nothing about this author and read this story in an anthology, I would first have been struck by its clever, de-dramatized hero monomyth of the sub-type known as 'journey to the interior'—a singularly appropriate, felicitously over-determined rubric, given the story's concern with eating and being eaten. The protagonist and Olivia journey through Mexico, entering a 'special world' whose boundaries coincide with those of ancient cultures steeped in ritual cannibalism. Their quest concerns the nature of this practice and the culinary preparations that might have rendered human flesh palatable. The climactic descent into the greatest of the Mayan tombs and subsequent re-emergence produce for the 'hero' an epiphanic vision that redefines his image of reality. The monomythic descent, acquisition of sacred knowledge, and return take place at the Temple of the Inscriptions, an appropriate setting for the epiphany of a writer, supposing the protagonist to be a partial projection of Calvino himself.

²⁰ First published under the title, 'Sapore, sapere', in *FMR*, June 1982. William Weaver's translation, 'The Jaguar Sun', appeared in *The New Yorker*, 5 Sept. 1983. The versions quoted are found in *Under the Jaguar Sun* and *Sotto il sole giaguaro*.

Being an experienced pursuer of monomyth readings, I enjoy the familiar pleasures: one knows the basics and tends to ask of the author, 'What new wrinkles have you devised?' The journey, the special world, the presence of an ancient culture, the descent into a tomb, the threat of sacrifice, the vision, and the return to the present time: Calvino indulges in all the trappings made popular by such journeys to the interior as Haggard's *She*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, Carpentier's *Lost Steps*, and a host of 'lost culture' and 'time warp' stories. He renews their powers, however, by exploring a new interior—not just Mexico and ancient Mexico, but the digestive void that drives us to eat. He works variations on the monomyth archetypes. Olivia is neither woman-as-goddess nor woman-as-temptress, but embodies features from both. The 'hero' spectacularly fails to achieve atonement-with-the-father (the priest-king), and reaches no conventional apotheosis, but his strange fantasy of being eaten yet surviving bestows a kind of immortality and thus godhead upon him. Readers can relish the way that Calvino achieves all this without departing from a realistic, twentieth-century setting. Other journeys to the interior derive much of their power from their use of the exotic; Calvino manages to merge the exotic with the strictly quotidian. The heightened flash of vision, for instance, superimposes itself on the drearily ordinary sight of tourists with their movie cameras and their tatty, 'usurped' sombreros.

Journeys to the interior frequently reveal some dark, repressed knowledge about humanity—Conrad's 'The horror, the horror'. Calvino's insight concerns ingestion. We constantly take part in that process. The confessor and abbess enjoyed so mutually consuming a relationship that his death caused hers. The nuns translated the ecstasies of religion into those experienced when eating their Indo-Hispanic cuisine. The early cultures ate human flesh in ritual, and consumed (in a more general sense) whole populations as sacrifices; those sacrifices were eaten symbolically by gods and literally by vultures. Olivia identifies political exploitation as a kind of cannibalistic ingestion. The buses disgorge and swallow tourists. As tourists themselves, the main characters consume Mexico and are consumed by it.

The insight is intensified by rendering it both erotic and visionary. The protagonist imagines being ingested by Olivia as a sensuous, even orgasmic, rapture:

It was the sensation of the teeth in my flesh that I was imagining, and I could feel her tongue lift me against the roof of her mouth, enfold me in saliva, then thrust me under the tips of the canines. . . . I felt also that I was acting on her, transmitting sensations that spread from the taste buds through her whole body. I was the one who aroused her every vibration—it was a reciprocal and complete relationship, which involved us and overwhelmed us. . . . I regained my composure; so did she. (p. 23)

Era la sensazione dei suoi denti nella mia carne che stavo immaginando, e sentivo la sua lingua sollevarmi contro la volta del palato, avvolgermi di saliva, poi spingermi sotto la punta dei canini. . . . sentivo anche che agivo su di lei, le trasmettevo sensazioni che si propagavano della papille della bocca per tutto il suo corpo, che ogni sua vibrazione ero io a provocarla: era un rapporto reciproco e completo che ci coinvolgeva e travolgeva. . . . Mi recomposi; ci ricomponemmo. ('Sotto il sole giaguaro', 50-1)

Atop the pyramid, the narrator loses his foothold in the present, becomes sacrificial victim, and feels reborn as vegetation. Calvino dramatically rends the fabrics of time, self, mode of existence, and life to display the ultimate action: ingestion.

Calvino even appears to weave ingestion into a joke for his theoretically inclined readers. Critics with a deconstructive bent were enthralled by the empty centre of Kublai Khan's chess square and the tarot grid's blank middle. In 'Under the Jaguar Sun' that absence first intrudes as uneasiness over a religious picture, which inspires 'a consuming void' ('un vuoto divorante'). Since this sensation compels an almost somnambulistic march to the dining-room, we find the 'central absence' beloved of deconstructors being turned into an empty stomach—and that gastric emptiness does reveal itself as an 'empty centre' of sorts in this story's cogitations.

The hero monomyth transcends individual author and culture, and so helps us place Calvino within the very broad framework of romance and quest. That is one useful context. Another critical approach would range less far afield, but would turn outward from the single work to Calvino's total *œuvre* in order to situate this story within his mental realm. Connections prove revealing but still tend to make us appreciate the individuality of this story, and its differences from his other works.

The narrator resembles Palomar in his ruminations and his self-consciousness. Indeed, the same Mexican trip that inspired this story also supplied a chapter in *Mr. Palomar* and three essays in *Collezione di sabbia*. At the Toltec ruins of Tula, Palomar is regaled with stories and myths and explanations by a friend, but is also impressed by a school-teacher who repeatedly tells his charges that we do not know what any of the symbolism means. The friend insists that the serpents bearing skulls in their mouths represent the continuity of life and death.

Mr. Palomar thinks that every translation requires another translation, and so on. He asks himself: 'What did death, life, continuity, passage mean for the ancient Toltecs? And what can they mean today for these boys? And for me?' Yet he knows he could never suppress in himself the need to translate, to move from one language to another, from concrete figures to abstract words, to weave and reweave a network of analogies. Not to interpret is impossible, as refraining from thinking is impossible. (p. 98)²¹

²¹ Evidently translator or printer skipped over 'da simboli astratti a esperienze concrete' ('from abstract symbols to concrete experience').

Il signor Palomar pensa che ogni traduzione richiede un'altra traduzione e così via. Si domanda: 'Cosa voleva dire morte, vita, continuità, passaggio, per gli antichi Toltechi? E cosa può voler dire per questi ragazzi? E per me?' Eppure sa che non potrebbe mai soffocare in sé il bisogno di tradurre, di passare da un linguaggio all'altro, da figure concrete a parole astratte, da simboli astratti a esperienze concrete, di tessere e ritessere una rete d'analogie. Non interpretare è impossibile, come è impossibile trattenersi dal pensare. (p. 100)

Palomar probes the same mesh of values that engages the nameless protagonist of 'Under the Jaguar Sun'—death and life, the image of serpents eating, and the interpretation of ancient glyphs.

He also faces the problem of translating enigmatic symbols when overhearing the purist teacher; in 'Under the Jaguar Sun' the narrator confronts hermeneutic puzzles when listening to the guide's patly pluralistic explanation of 'Los Danzantes'. Such problematics of interpretation hark back to *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, but the emotional tone of the two works differs. The protagonist here behaves with oddly sensual detachment, whereas the tarot narrator exudes desperation as he sifts through tarot tales of madness, violence, and death. The adjacency of the void causes his distress, for wherever he focuses upon Western literature, its fabric thins and dissolves into nothingness. In 'Under the Jaguar Sun' the void intrudes in several guises—as death of victim, as death of prior civilizations, and as the disturbingly permeable divisions between stones and flesh, flesh and vegetation, and stones and vegetation. However, these manifestations of the void not only fail to swallow the consciousness of the protagonist, they do not even terrorize him.

In 'La foresta e gli dèi' Calvino speaks *in propria persona* of Palenque, and notes that ultimately Mayan glyphs all represent the cycle of maize vegetation: 'underneath every discourse runs the sap of plants; a relationship, almost a mirror-image, has established itself between the carved stone and the forest' ('in fondo a ogni discorso c'è lo scorrere della linfa nelle piante; un rapporto quasi di specularità si è stabilito tra la pietra scolpita e la foresta' (*Collezione di sabbia*, 201)).

'Under the Jaguar Sun' conjoins the fermenting vegetation of 'La foresta e gli dèi' and Palomar's hermeneutical problems, making them subordinate voices in a more intricate and sensuous fugue. Hence, 'Under the Jaguar Sun' relates to the rest of Calvino's output in comprehensible thematic ways, but explores new material through the focusing mechanism of taste. The ultimate taste, human flesh, in turn suggests spiritual cannibalism as a symbolic representation of existence, and this in turn gives a new means of expressing the process of travel, the networks binding any culture together, and the intricacies of amorous relationships.

In checking this story against the entire canon, one notes the unusual degree of interiority. One finds the same hyper-conscious awareness in *Mr. Palomar*, and something similar in another of the stories in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, 'A King Listens'. The other story, 'The Name, the Nose', though outward-directed, shares the atypical concern with death. However, the dead-but-living consciousness fleetingly present in 'Under the Jaguar Sun' reminds one most of Palomar's experiment in being dead and of the tarot tale tellers, some of whom have apparently passed through death to reach castle or tavern.

If we ask about the nature of Calvino's symbols, we find very different concerns. Ian Thomson (1984-5: 63) notes Calvino's preference for multiple approaches: 'Calvino has always, in fact, been hostile to definitive interpretations. Elsewhere he has said: "I agree to my books being read as existential or as structural works, as Marxist or neo-Kantian, Freudianly or Jungianly: but above all I am glad when I see that no single key will turn the lock"'. With this prompting, and because Freudian and Jungian approaches have been rewarding when applied to the early works, I would turn next in that direction.

With ingestion as subject, we can hardly avoid both seeing the oral aggressions and interpreting the images of engulfment as oral fantasies. Nor are castration anxieties absent; the narrator exhibits a fascination with knives and feels somewhat threatened by the women at the party with their scraping cutlery and knives slicing cake. He also submits to the ominous king-priest-father with the knife. I am not an experienced Freudian reader, but do find it plausible that genital fears should be displaced upward to the heart in this story. (After all, they are frequently displaced upward to the eyes.)

All of these laden images belong to the early life stages, with the oral and genital and Oedipal predominating. Adult sexual problems take on an oral patina when the couple's temporary sexual troubles are relieved, following the ingestion of a dish called 'plump girls pinched with butter'. The plethora of knives performing various dismemberments bespeak genital-stage anxieties. The king-priest, equivalent to the man-eating giant of fairy-tales, is an Oedipal-stage father whose tyranny threatens to press the protagonist back to an infantile state of undifferentiation between self and world, between conscious and unconscious.

Using Aurore Frasson-Marin's (1986) Jungian and structuralist concepts to focus one's awareness, one notices the importance of horizontality, fall, the undifferentiated, and 'la chute suspendue', all of them harking back more to the trilogy than to intermediate novels. Cosimo in particular struggles to maintain his erect bearing in face of Violante's invitations to descend, and he nearly falls once but is hooked by a branch and ends ignominiously suspended upside down—his version of the

'chute suspendue'. In 'Under the Jaguar Sun' the verticals are distanced and impersonal: Monte Albán is reached by ascending, and so is the top of the Temple of the Inscriptions; trees struggle against the downward-tugging network of creepers. However, this protagonist does not share trilogy protagonists' desperation to ascend; he seems instead to be exploring what horizontality offers him. The journey he takes is horizontal; he identifies himself with a serpent, that most horizontal of creatures; and his activities in bed do not go unchronicled.

In archetypal terms, horizontality is associated with the feminine, the unconscious, and undifferentiation. In 'Under the Jaguar Sun' the feminine and the undifferentiated are variously represented by Olivia, by the mass of vegetation, by the political tea-party with its sea of femininity, by the hordes of tourists, by the destruction of differentiation through eating, and by various kinds of ecstasies, including sex. The protagonist finds a compromise position between horizontality and the upright alignment of consciousness by assuming the pose of a *chac-mool*. He undergoes a 'chute suspendue', prefigured by the upside-down god seen carved at Monte Albán: this vertigo and fantasy of being sacrificed by the priest-king involve a fall that does not kill him as would a real plunge down the face of the pyramid. The final insight involves the fusion of opposites, eating and being eaten; such a *coincidentia oppositorum* (as Frasson-Marin (1986) notes) is characteristic of the cosmicomical tales, and that kinship reminds us that some of the narrator's attitudes are much like those of Qfwfq, narrator of those stories. The notion of intriguing the woman who consumes him by means of his flavours, and his petulant but ingratiating protest that his mild savour demands subtlety of perception are very Qfwfq-like.

These approaches to the story, chosen because they have proved their worth on other Calvino tales, all appeal to me, and I value their insights. How, though, can we go beyond them? Obviously they do not fall short in terms of enriching our understanding and responses to the story. Especially when taken together, they offer an exciting introduction to the texture and substance of the narrative. They do not, however, reveal whatever it is that constitutes 'l'inconfondibile accento dell'autore'. They do not get at whatever it is that makes this recognizably by Italo Calvino despite the surface novelties of Mexican setting, cannibalistic subject, and attention to the nuances of taste. Take the fact that 'Under the Jaguar Sun' was to have been one of five stories devoted to the senses. Where does this subject fit in Calvino's range of interests? How does it relate to tarot cards and cosmic vistas? On the surface, the story might be the work of someone else, for Calvino pays little attention to any sense but sight in his other works. None the less, that Ovidian 'je ne sais quoi' alerts any reader to the obvious kinship. So in what does that kinship consist? How can we define it?

Impressions of a Labyrinth: 'Under the Jaguar Sun'

My own starting point, chief subject of this book, would be the Cartesian cogito and the minimal units or flux that it tries to order. That cogito sees, weighs, tastes, tests, tries to draw conclusions or at least extract inferences from the data confronting it. Such a consciousness is Calvino's normal nucleus. His exploring the senses as mediation between mind and matter is appropriate, if not inevitable, given other mediations he was exploring at the time. Palomar, a notably cerebral character, is a mind-body exploring the joint limitations of this clumsy beast as it deals with lawns and star-maps, and cheeses and Japanese gravel gardens. Calvino had also been developing a piece based on Casanova's memoirs. The fragment published ('Le memorie di Casanova') shows women to be the minimal units of the cosmos. The thinking seducer's means of relating to his universe consists of his own sexual ploys and his individualized recitations about the doings in high society. Both of these works exhibit a more sensual perception of reality than we find for instance in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. In that respect 'Under the Jaguar Sun' belongs among Calvino's late works.

Typically, the protagonist of 'Under the Jaguar Sun' values his consciousness for its ruminations, for the internal flow of ideas. The outside world hardly exists for him except as a stimulus for thought, and he admits that much of his relationship to exterior reality is mediated by Olivia. She calls things to his attention, she asks questions and plants darts in his imagination, setting off trains of thought that intrigue and even enchant him. He is hyper-conscious of the flow of ideas, experiencing the ideas themselves, his own reactions to them, and his reactions to those reactions, for he observes himself minutely. This elaborate self-consciousness so focused on acts of thought is indeed a cogito; it exists because it thinks.

The horizons of his universe in this story are more constricted than in the cosmicomic tales, but none the less reach from vegetal juices to the sun, and from Olmec times to the present, an extraordinary span compared to that in most short fiction. Like many Calvino protagonists, this one sees the cosmos as a flux that threatens to annihilate his consciousness by resisting his mental schemata for ordering it. Where this story differs from others is its rendering the flux in several competing guises. It appears as vegetation, mentioned as a component in the original nuns' world and experienced in Palenque as a clinging fabric of vines, a network of blood and chlorophyll. Flux reappears as the delirious sensations of baroque religion and the incandescent ecstasy of the matching cuisine. Meaning dissolves into flux in the plethora of glyphs that defy solid interpretation. The fluttering, twittering female flux of

tea-party guests exudes subtle and sinister threats to the masculine self and understanding.

Naturally, the response to engulfment is some form of resistance. In *Cosmicomics* Qfwfq agilely staves off threats to his individuality, but betrays considerable uneasiness when the danger approaches. More anguished is the narrator in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* when he faces chaos. We do find a few positive responses to flux among Calvino's many renditions of this confrontation: Qfwfq dreams of relaxing in the blood-warm ocean ('Blood, Sea') and pictures himself sinking into the interior seas of his love's eyes ('The Spiral'). In 'The Origin of the Birds' we find something approaching ecstasy, a momentary melting of barriers in a holistic vision accompanying orgasm. In 'Under the Jaguar Sun', however, we find the melting-of-self as ecstasy in several guises, and the protagonist experiences some form of it when tipped over the edge by the whirling world: 'The world spun, I plunged down, my throat cut by the knife of the king-priest, down the high steps' (p. 28) ('Il mondo vortico, precipitavo sgozzato dal coltello del re-sacerdote giù dagli alti gradini' (p. 56)). The vortex (latent in 'vortico') is one of several variants on flux that Calvino uses elsewhere, perhaps appropriated from Cartesian metaphysics. Whereas a vortex seemed the supreme threat to the imploding narrator of 'L'implosione', here it proves both more ominous (his throat is cut) and yet less so because consciousness and personality somehow survive. He is both killed and not killed. In this he resembles the speaking cell in 'Mitosis', who preserves awareness and memory despite losing them in the momentary rupture in the self's barriers.

The threat of dissolution is thus severally acted out in the story. That the narrator retains some sense of power over this flux is signalled by his reliance on an ordering system. He renders the cosmos particulate through the many dishes named, and through the dancing combinations of flavours. These flavours are less discrete than Calvino's usual basic units—such as cities or tarot cards—because our language of flavours is so relatively undeveloped compared to the language of colour or to the periodic table. He has to invent the elements of description as he goes along: *chiles en nogada* are 'reddish brown, somewhat wrinkled little peppers, swimming in a walnut sauce whose harshness and bitter aftertaste were drowned in a creamy, sweetish surrender' (p. 5) ('peperoncini rossobruni, un po' rugosi, nuotanti in una salsa di noci la cui asprezza pungente e il fondo amaro si perdevano in un'arrendevolezza cremosa e dolcigna' (p. 31)). He uses musical terms (modulations, chords, dissonances) and sexual nuances to render the experience. Asperity and sourness, fat softness, sweet pungency: these are the sort of units from which not only a cuisine but ultimately a country and culture are reconstructed. The literal interiorizing of the food permits a mental reassembly of the shards of experience into an interior reality, a Rilkean

Weltinnenraum. At this stage of my exposition, I can only state that the cogito and the particulate cosmos are typical, yet the details of this manifestation constitute a strange and novel variation for Calvino. The next chapter will make the truth of both assertions more apparent.

Another characteristic of Calvino's fictive universes is their metamorphic quality, metamorphosis being one form that flux can take. The former convent is now a hotel with a bar named 'Las Novicias'. The yearnings and throbs which normally take place in bed are transformed by the narrator into experiences at the dinner table, and then translated back again to bed, and then again to eating. The visited country takes on the form of food to be digested. Birth becomes death and death, birth when the narrator contemplates the bas-relief of a caesarian section and likens this operation to the sacrifice that carves through ribs to extract the living heart. Sacrificial victims undergo rapid metamorphoses to become the food of the gods, the gods themselves, and the meat for a sacramental meal on earth. During breakfast in bed, the protagonist and Olivia petrify into *chac-mools*, the trays of food on their laps, their faces as blank as the stone statues. Solar energy is transformed into blood and chlorophyll. The protagonists change into serpents swallowing each other while eating and transforming *huachinango a la veracruzana* into their own substance.

Shape-shifting capacity makes the universe difficult to systematize. Change of shape relates closely to change of meaning as well—hence the hermeneutic troubles highlighted at Monte Albán and in Palomar's Mexican story, 'Serpents and skulls'. In the latter, Calvino explores such shifting forms and their interpretation when Palomar notes that

in Mexican archeology every statue, every object, every detail of a bas-relief stands for something that stands for something else that stands, in turn, for yet another something. An animal stands for a god who stands for a star that stands for an element or a human quality, and so on. (pp. 95–6)

Nell'archeologia messicana ogni statua, ogni oggetto, ogni dettaglio di bassorilievo significa qualcosa che significa qualcosa che a sua volta significa qualcosa. Un animale significa un dio che significa una stella che significa un elemento o una qualità umana e così via. (p. 97)

In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* the same tarot takes on four meanings in four tales; some of Marco Polo's cities take on different shapes and meanings according to perspective; in *If on a winter's night a traveler* a story supposedly by Calvino is attributed variously to Tazio Bazakbal, Ukko Ahti, Ermes Marana, Silas Flannery, and Takakumi Ikoka, but of course, it is ultimately by Italo Calvino. That meaning, physical presence, authorship even, should be so insubstantial naturally disturbs a Cartesian consciousness trying to discover order.

If metamorphoses are part of the problem, they are also part of the

solution. The changes are welcome because they emerge as sacred in a structuralist analysis of this fictive universe. They replace death (Hume, 1984). We see that replacement vividly in 'Under the Jaguar Sun', when the protagonist envisions having his throat cut, yet lives; experiences the ecstasy of eating and being eaten, yet lives. Both involve transformations, but the fatal engulfment does not terminate consciousness. Rather, it expands consciousness so that the sense of continuum is experienced as stretching between self and vegetation, between self and the tastebuds of one's consumer, between self and ordinary food, between time past and present, and between two people as a mental and physical relationship in which each lives off the other. The importance of what Calvino achieves here will not be apparent until we have looked at the rest of his canon, but let me suggest that in this fiction he explores a very different range of sensations and possibilities, and he manages here to put aside a nearly constant fear of disintegration.

The fascination with cannibalism changes import when we see it as a variation on the theme of self dissolved in flux; given taste as the ostensible focus, this tabooed and somewhat decadent subject seems almost inevitable. Moreover, the alert lightness with which Calvino handles the issue may derive its buoyancy from his success in handling the subsurface anxieties over engulfment. The unusual solutions achieved can be noted because of what is constant between this story and most of his other work, a relationship between an active consciousness and a complicated, particulate cosmos.

The particles or units of experience which most intrigue the narrator are flavours and acts of eating. The author, however, deals in another kind of unit. The story consists of a series of ekphrases—descriptions of art objects—perhaps a subtle variant on the tarot cards. Interlaced with these, and playing off against them, are the narrator's intimate insights regarding his relations with Olivia. The flavours exfoliate from the recipes, the latter constituting a kind of narrative art. The other ekphrases describe the painting of abbess and confessor, sacred Christian architecture, 'Los Danzantes' at Monte Albán, the tea-party presided over by a political portrait, the *chac-mool* statue, and the Temple of the Inscriptions, particularly its innermost glyphs.

Almost all the ekphrases are devoted to artifacts of faith, to beliefs so strong that they permit ecstasy, assurance, and a sense of meaning untroubled by scruple or doubt. The painting depicts a love that was chaste as concerns mere flesh, but so powerful that the confessor's death supposedly caused the much younger abbess to fall ill and expire one day later. They believed in both heaven and 'amore', an ultra-terrestrial yearning. While the limits imposed on their relationship, as portrayed by the painter, suggest an ache of suffering, their picture none the less creates in the narrator the consuming void mentioned earlier. His own relationship has sensual dimensions denied to these two, but evidently it

lacks something they enjoy, and they seem to him a model possibly worthy of emulation and certainly of contemplation. Owing to a temporary aridity in the couple's sexual life, the narrator remarks that he and Olivia were in a suitable mental state for imagining what such a chaste love might have been like. He further speculates that such a love might have expressed itself through the carnality of food. The painted couple sensitizes him to the idea of flavours as a complex language in which to render personal relationships, but their ecstasy remains unattainable. Their belief structure is alien.

Sacred architecture demands another extremity of belief. 'God's presence was identified [in colonial baroque] in a closely calculated delirium of brimming, excessive sensations' (p. 7) ('per [il barocco coloniale] la presenza di Dio era identificata in un delirio minuziosamente calcolato di sensazioni eccessive e traboccanti' (p. 33)). The Jesuit church at Tepotzotlán, with its gold and colours, its 'dancing and acrobatic baroque' challenges Aztec grandiosity. The narrator lavishes wonderful adjectives on the sensations expressed through the architecture, but does not himself seem moved. He is apparently more susceptible to the seductions of the Indo-Hispanic food: hot peppers do more than churches can to introduce him to 'estasi fiammeggiante' (flaming ecstasy). The fugitive flavour of *cilantro* prompts both a salivary response and a savourous analysis of the latest interchange with Olivia.

Monte Albán produces a display of absolute faith from their guide; he knows precisely what the enigmatic and much disputed 'Danzantes' mean. He is radiant at the thought of ancient violence:

'To have your chest split open by the obsidian knife was an honor!' And in a crescendo of ancestral patriotism, just as he had boasted of the excellence of the scientific knowledge of the ancient peoples, so now this worthy descendant of the Olmecs feels called upon to exalt the offering of a throbbing human heart to the sun to assure that the dawn would return each morning and illuminate the world. (pp. 14-15)

'Avere il petto squarciato dal coltello d'ossidiana era un onore!' e in un crescendo di patriottismo ancestrale, come ha vantato l'eccellenza del sapere scientifico degli antichi popoli, così ora il buon discendente degli Olmechi si sentiva in dovere di esaltare l'offerta al sole d'un cuore umano palpitante, perché l'aurora ritorni a illuminare il mondo ogni mattino. (pp. 41-2)

Clearly the narrator cannot entirely agree with this fervour and its values, and he knows enough of the difficulties we have interpreting glyphs to imply doubt about Alonso's confident readings.

I will return to the tea-party shortly, but let us look first at the other art forms. The *chac-mool* statue is ambiguous but powerful:

It could be the victim himself, supine on the altar, offering his own entrails on the dish. Or the sacrificer, who assumes the pose of the victim because he is aware that tomorrow it will be his turn. Without this reciprocity, human sacrifice would be unthinkable. (p. 26)

Potrebbe essere la vittima stessa, supina sull'altare, che offre le proprie viscere sul piatto . . . O il sacrificatore che assume la posa della vittima perché sa che domani toccherà a lui . . . Senza questa reversibilità il sacrificio umano sarebbe impensabile. (pp. 53-4, ellipses in the original.)

None the less the necessity of both eating and being eaten illuminates the narrator's musings and produces exaltation in the form of sexual renewal. He and Olivia partake of breakfast in bed the next morning, looking like a pair of *chac-mools*. The fact that we cannot interpret the artifact does not rob it of its magic. Whatever our uncertainty, the statue itself symbolizes a culture of absolute faith, and resonates still with the wonder of that power.

The Temple of the Inscriptions provides the narrator with another ekphrasis and another ecstasy: as he returns from the crypt to the glare of the jaguar sun, he momentarily shears through limits of time and self, and experiences the stab and fall of ancient victims. He finds his consciousness merging with the 'forest' of tourists and with the networks of blood and chlorophyll. He merges with the fibres of everything under the sun that chews and digests, echoing the inscriptions which figure the body's descent to an underworld and its rebirth as vegetation. Subsequently, he and Olivia begin to eat:

Our teeth began to move slowly, with equal rhythm, and our eyes stared into each other's with the intensity of serpents—serpents concentrated in the ecstasy of swallowing each other in turn, as we were aware, in our turn, of being swallowed by the serpent that digests us all. (p. 29)

i nostri denti presero a muoversi lentamente con pari ritmo e i nostri sguardi si fissarono l'uno nell'altro con un'intensità di serpenti. Serpenti immedesimati nello spasimo d'inghiottirci a vicenda, coscienti d'essere a nostra volta inghiottiti dal serpente che tutti ci digerisce . . . (p. 56)

All of these ekphrases echo or comment on the narrator's own attempt to understand various alien cultural modes of making sense of life, their apparent ability to reach ecstasy, some through faiths no longer available to him. He is exploring possibilities, and each new insight he then applies to his relationship with Olivia, since, he admits, he mostly relates to the universe through her, stimulated by her perceptions and enthusiasms. In this story, the cogito interacts with the cosmos through Olivia's good offices, or at least she intervenes in the communion of the I and the Not-I as a third force, insisting on awareness, clarity, and concentration, not permitting relaxation into vagueness. Religious faith, whether Christian or Aztec, is unable to win his assent, but the symmetries of reciprocity, the implications of a cuisine striving for flaming ecstasy, sexual success, the metamorphic oneness of everything with tropical vegetation, and the invocation of serpents as a multifaceted image: all these converge to give

the narrator some moments that transcend the ordinary. Vision and inspiration are his, and possibly ecstasy, if only for the instant.

The tea-party is also an ekphrastic unit in a broad sense of the term; the tea-party is a social or political art, and it is presided over by the huge political portrait of the aspirant first lady. Calvino indulges in an extended fantasia on sounds: the chattering women sound like the gurgle and splash of rivulets and whirlpools ('vortici'). The noise is likened to birds' trilling, clucking and cawing, but actually consists of the clink and scrape of cutlery and china, of knives cutting slices of cake—an apparently harmless activity compared to the cutting out of hearts we have just had described to us. When Olivia and he try to talk to Salustiano, the din drowns all their friend's disquisition except a few words: blood, obsidian, solar divinity. The fluttery modern babble overwhelms everything but the basic hypotheses about the earlier culture, just as time has erased all but these same elements. What we learn of the ancient sacred feast comes to us through a 'barrier of sound' or 'racket'—in communication theory known as background noise or static. Salustiano's final comment pierces through the noise flux to advert to another devouring flux: 'It was a sacred cuisine. It had to celebrate the harmony of the elements achieved through sacrifice—a terrible harmony, flaming, incandescent' (p. 20) ('Era una cucina sacra . . . doveva celebrare l'armonia degli elementi raggiunta attraverso il sacrificio, un'armonia terribile, fiammeggiante, incandescente' (p. 48 ellipses in the original.)).

Later that evening, Olivia muses on cannibalism as a statement of our times:

We who tear one another apart, pretending not to know it, pretending not to taste flavors anymore.²² . . . The same as at home, even now. Only we no longer know it, no longer dare look the way they did. For them there was no mystification: the horror was right there, in front of their eyes. (p. 22)

noi che ci sbranziamo facendo finta di non saperlo, facendo finta di non sentire più i sapori. . . . Tal quale da noi anche ora . . . Solo che noi non lo sappiamo più, non osiamo guardare, come facevano loro . . . per loro non c'erano mistificazioni, l'orrore era lì, sotto i loro occhi. (p. 49)

Olivia may only be referring to their personal symbiotic relationship, but the 'we who tear one another apart, pretending not to know it' would seem to have broader, political implications. Whether aimed at the bourgeoisie or at Western culture or capitalism, one can indeed say that we pretend we do not devour others, when really we are just afraid to face and acknowledge our predations. Indeed, the anti-colonialist would argue, as Calvino himself does in his 'impossible interview' with

²² I would prefer to translate 'i sapori' as 'the flavors' in order to specify the human components.

Montezuma, that the European conquistadores shed far more blood than did the Aztecs in their sanguinary rites. The context for Olivia's remark is an apocalyptic landscape. Old men and women are meretriciously young; the young wait for their mescaline suppliers to come by, or simply sit, looking with their bleached long hair like Old Age. The reversals exude the aura of Time's twilight. The narrator does not pursue Olivia's image further; indeed, he soon rejects his notion that the eating is onesided, at least in regard to his domestic dyad. He plants a dart in our minds, however, a hint of political comment.

What the narrator does in this story is explore possibilities. He follows forking paths in various directions, seeing where an idea—taste—will lead. He tries to chart its ultimate exfoliations. At the same time, this Cartesian cogito is seeking ways to organize experience. The ekphrases let him explore the world of an ancient civilization, the architecture and glyphs being all that remain. The painting from colonial times offers another ideal, another way of ordering experience, the political portrait yet another, austere out of tune with the fluttery tinkle of Mexican matrons, who themselves constitute another system of belief. That last scene, with its stress on overwhelming sound, projects a choked, smothered sensation, as if the modern political scene were devoting itself to overwhelming trivialization. Or perhaps this sacred feast, with its scrape of knives, hints that political systems can still persuade their subjects to be willing victims. When the cogito is threatened with such a flux, we know that it could be annihilated, in this case smothered by the sound. The utter femininity of this flux is even a threat to masculinity and to the 'masculine consciousness' of Jungian terminology. The political content of this story, though couched in gossamer terms, suggests a sly, light-fingered critique of current political values.

By placing this story in relation to the common core of Calvino's work, I have tried to make sense of it in ways that transcend those available to critics focusing on the work in terms of genre, or even in terms of superficial concerns shared with other portions of Calvino's work. What does my approach accomplish? To begin with, it brings Calvino's organizing questions to the fore. How does our sense of taste mediate between our consciousness and the cosmos? What levels of reality does taste permit us to study? How do these differ from the levels reached by other modes of observation? In what fashion can taste create a sense of meaning for experience?

In addition to recognizing the questions, we have noted part of his answer: the technique for approaching one's subject. By following forking paths and trying many different approaches—all the ekphrases, all the meditations on aspects of taste—Calvino tests many models for organizing experience. He matches a particulate answer to a pulviscular question.

Calvino has explored other systems that mediate between cogito and cosmos in his earlier fictions: science, narrative, and social structures, for instance. In this story the ultimate units are less easily identifiable than some of his other particles or minimal units. They are tastes, yes, but tastes that seamlessly join to surging, formless energies: solar energy as absorbed by vegetation, the vegetal lymph and blood being ultimately one; the chemical energy in hot peppers that blasts one to flaming ecstasies; religious energies (whether directed outward in conquest or inward in prayer) that take material forms as architecture and as cuisine; political energy so powerful it persuades its subjects to relinquish their living hearts or to measure out their lives in coffee-spoons; and erotic energy, as embodied in a lively, quirky, highly self-conscious companionship.

Each time taste directs us into one of these energy fields, we face not a universe reducible to discrete quanta but rather a flux of currents, eddies, and vortices of power, all attempting to dissolve the structures defining ourselves as an entity and subsume that spark of individual consciousness. In some stories, Calvino descends toward the microscopic or even the atomic and sub-atomic levels of reality. In this instance, he forgoes the chemical reactions of taste in favour of macro-structures—its various social ramifications and its power to relate us directly to matter. If all systems of ordering the universe must have gaps—a generalized application of Gödel's Theorem—so must this, and taste leads us to such an abyss when taste confronts the death of what is eaten. Calvino pays little attention to the victims implicit in this means of symbolizing existence. Typically, also, we find no consideration of the excrement that results from ingestion. Calvino's sense of decorum is conservative and fastidious.

While looking at the social systems and digestion by means of taste, he explores rather than explaining or analysing. Conclusions, if any, are implicit and left strictly to the reader. Like myth, his stories resist closure and are open to multiple interpretations. Are we to extrapolate from his picture of an ancient political system that convinces its subjects to be willing victims, and apply that model in some fashion to contemporary politics? Calvino gives us no hint, but does juxtapose the two by means of a modern sacred feast—the political tea-party—and the scrape of knives. Does Olivia's remark about cannibalism and the modern world have political applications? If so, we have to make the connections. Calvino gives us the possibility, but does not direct us to fixed conclusions. He explores the attractions and sensations of the inchoate, the horizontal, the undifferentiated without making moral distinctions between vertical and horizontal or between self and flux. One reason this story is so powerful is that it opens itself to multiple readings and different emphases such as politics, colonialization, Christianity, ancient

sacrifice, food, and erotics.²³ It is literature not of completion but of potential in many senses, as befits the work of a member of OULIPO.

The I's probing of the not-I gives us a rich background for studying any Calvino story. The kinship of various symbols will emerge. His anxieties and joys will take on relative coherence as their place in ongoing patterns becomes clear. That which is typically Calvinian will crystallize when such common ground is sought. Because criticism hitherto has focused almost entirely on the individual, the separate, the distinct, I am deliberately choosing to focus on what unites the canon, an antithesis to the prevailing thesis. The critical fashion will probably continue to oscillate between the two poles of diversity and unity. My study simply attempts to improve our sense of the latter. Ignoring the kaleidoscopic metamorphoses and novelties deprives one of the complex and fugitive flavours of Calvino's fictions—but ignoring his restless, omnipresent quest for ways of relating consciousness to cosmos blinds one to the stable, persistent intelligence that guided his endeavours and informed those same fictions with the 'accento inconfondibile'.

²³ Like 'Under the Jaguar Sun', 'A King Listens', in the same collection, lends itself to multiple interpretations. The reviewer Michael Wood points to Calvino's admiration for Jarry's *L'amour absolu*, which is readable in three entirely different fashions, and then points out that 'A King Listens' may be 'the story of a king', 'a metaphor for insomnia or solitude', and 'a picture of writing and reading, of the way we put fabulous (and not so fabulous) worlds together out of words' (1988: 39).

Calvino's Cosmos and the Gazing I

a kind of eye-dust that crosses the sea

('The Spiral', 153)

un pulviscolo d'occhi che attraversa il mare

('La spirale', 236)

Eyes, dust, and the sea: these represent the significant elements of Calvino's cosmos. He explores the material form of that cosmos in two guises. One corresponds to dust: particles, granules, separable and divisible units. The other, here represented by the sea, is that state matter reaches when particles coalesce into flux or paste. The non-material component is consciousness and this too Calvino perceives in dual form: as eyes and as mind. Dust and paste, eyes and Cartesian cogito—these are the strange building-blocks of Calvino's fiction.

Calvino's stories concern a very physical universe. Meaning must be derivable from the interaction of mind with matter or with the material object contemplated, not from some transcendent value. Hence my unusual stress on the material qualities of his fictive cosmos. His strange creations in this realm are the foundation for peculiarities which contribute to the 'unmistakable tone' or 'accento inconfondibile' setting him apart from other twentieth-century writers.

One can pun upon Gertrude's question to Hamlet: 'Why seems it so particular with thee?' (*Hamlet*, i.ii) Why particles, and why should particulate nature concern Calvino? The material universe and its inner workings do not interest most recent writers. The ultimate grains of matter do in fact worry Hamlet, who rejects with horror an atomic and metamorphic vision quite similar to Calvino's. That Alexander's dust might stop a barrel or Caesar's clay daub a wall causes Hamlet real agony. Calvino is not as naïve or easily daunted as the renaissance prince, and only once is Qfwfq moved by Hamletian anguish, when he exclaims, 'To explode or implode . . . that's the question' ('Esplodere o implodere . . . questo è il problema' ('L'implosione', 217)). As I shall try to demonstrate, Calvino invests much of his energy in this basic confrontation between mind and matter, and his values derive from this opposition.

Indeed, the confrontation resonates at all levels of his thought. According to Calvino's images and vocabulary, human interactions lie in an unbroken continuum with the physical world; the granularity of one extends into the other. For now let a single example illustrate the significance of this strange continuity between mind and matter. Calvino remarks in 'On Fourier, III' that he can no longer bring himself to believe in a solid utopia; instead, he looks for one that is pulviscular, dustlike, and corpuscular. By implication, political and economic plans will be barren if they do not come to terms with the particulate form underlying their own existence. Only by matching granular solutions to granular problems can we progress.

Before we can appreciate Calvino's alchemical experiments with strange elements we need to understand what they mean to him and how he defines the human project. Future chapters will explore particular fictions; this chapter will concern itself more broadly with Calvino's metaphysic and with the intelligence confronting the cosmos implicit in that metaphysic. The first section will sketch the characteristics of this granular world—its lightness, its metamorphic powers, its relationship to the void and to Vision. The second section will deal with flux and its symbolic variants. The third will explore the Eye and the I, those forms of the cogito which confront the material world and attempt to derive a sense of meaning from it. The fourth section will examine Calvino's attitudes toward observation and interpretation, those mediations between mind and matter.

Cosmic and Metaphysical Dust

The strange granularity of Calvino's worlds does not explicitly declare itself; rather, readers become sensitized to this quality by his arresting use of such terms as 'pulviscolo'—powder or dust. In the first of his *Six Memos*, 'Lightness', he muses on how the world is supported by minute entities such as DNA, neurons, and quarks. Language that has freed itself from the enervating heaviness of existence is said to hover about things like 'the finest dust' ('un pulviscolo sottile'). He calls the melancholy of Shakespeare's Jacques a 'pulviscolo' of atoms, the ultimate substance of everything. He even likens writing to the 'powder-fine substance of the world' ('sostanza pulviscolare del mondo') and cites Lucretius, the Kabbalists, Raimon Lull, Pico della Mirandola, and Galileo for their notion that letters of the alphabet are the ultimate particles whose permutations permit thought and its products. 'Collezione di sabbia' represents the world and human life as sand and powder, and Calvino's using that phrase as title for the book implies some equivalence between his essays and grains of sand. Palomar likens humans to sand ('la sabbia umana') when viewing a Japanese sand garden, and Qfwfq speaks of time-sand

('il tempo-sabbia') when discussing shells laid down in geological strata ('Le conchiglie e il tempo'). Calvino amplifies the topos, the sands of memory, into a moist bed of sand deposited by the torrent of thoughts, each of the billions of grains a memory ('Ricordo di una battaglia'). In the invisible city of Laodomia the unborn citizens are envisioned as granules of powder. The tarot narrator loses his story in the 'pulviscolo' of other stories. In 'Le fiamme in fiamme' we find that entropy will reduce everything to a powder-fine dust of particles, and in one of the uncollected 'Taccuino del Signor Palomar' columns, the universe is slated to dissolve into a formless 'pulviscolo'. That fish eyes in 'The Spiral' should be described as dust is startling, to say the least. 'At Daybreak' shows Qfwfq's relatives suspended in a 'pulviscolo' in which granules are forming. Likewise Palomar floats in a void, surrounded by a 'pulviscolo' of present or possible events.¹

Once 'pulviscolo' or dust has impressed itself on our awareness through such strange irruptions, we recognize the granular principle in other forms. In the scientific guise of neutrinos it miraculously engenders the fragile and contingent cosmos out of nothing ('Il niente e il poco'). Qfwfq's originary sign begets so many others that he claims that universe and space could not exist without these signs ('A Sign in Space'). In 'I meteoriti', pre-culturized objects such as spigots, Ionic capitals, and issues of the *Herald Tribune* rain down on the expanding earth. Wha, that pre-eminent *bricoleuse*, then combines them into the cultural mosaic we inhabit today. In 'The Spiral', the universe proves not only orderly but lovable because inhabited by so many avatars of the Feminine; Calvino expands this vision of the *Ewig-Weibliche* in an intricate cadenza that stretches from infant anchovies and female gulls to lighthouse-keepers' daughters, actresses, singers, queens, slaves, tourist girls on a beach, and queen bees. In another uncollected Palomar column, 'Gli dei degli oggetti', we find the minimal unit to be the deities embedded in everyday objects. The elements may be signs, cultural fragments, females, or even gods, but seen as a thickness of entities, they make up worlds.

The contiguity of matter to mind-stuff is shown when Calvino uses the same multiplication of small units as structuring principle for all his later works. Tarot cards and novel incipits are obvious mental products, while cities blend mind with matter. We also see multiplication in his clusters of short, similar narratives: the mythological fables of the cosmicomic tales, the urban adventures of Marcovaldo, the difficult loves, the observational exercises of Palomar. In all of these, someone is trying to make sense of experience in the world, be it the world of the indifferent urbs (*Marcovaldo*), of empire (*Invisible Cities*), or of literature as it relates to such enclaves as academe, the publishing world, and the police state (*If*

¹ Some of these passages are discussed by Muzzioli, who associates such 'pulviscoli' with the aleatory, provisional nature of Calvino's world.

on a winter's night a traveler). In *Mr. Palomar*, we find the purest example of the human project since the cosmicomical tales. Calvino defines this project as mind meeting matter and struggling to arrive at meaning, and each chapter of *Mr. Palomar* is an element in a kind of periodic table of human enquiry.

We will see plenty more evidence of granularity's centrality to Calvino's vision when we examine its alternative state of being, paste or flux. Let us shift our attention for the moment to the characteristics attaching to this universe of swarming atomies.

Lucretius presides over this particulate cosmos, and Ovid hovers over the metamorphic capabilities inhering in its granularity. The prevalence of metamorphosis and transformation is quickly established in the cosmicomical realm. In 'The Dinosaurs' Qfwfq as the last dinosaur traverses valleys and plains, reaches a station, and takes the first train. The men in 'Le figlie della Luna' find themselves rampaging across the savannahs as woolly mammoths after the moon maidens leave Earth. The Big Bang transforms Mrs Ph(i)Nk₀ into the energy-heat-light of the universe ('All at One Point'). In 'The Origin of the Birds', Qfwfq starts in the Jurassic period but speaks to us out of an era in which photographs exist. As is consonant with a metamorphic universe, Qfwfq occupies different physical forms in each story: bodiless mind, imploding star, dinosaur, mollusc, reptile, human, dividing cell, and a variety of indistinct forms compatible with marrying an aurora borealis or existing without support in space.

Such transformations take more intellectual and less body-oriented form in the fictions after *La memoria del mondo*. Each tarot card, for instance, undergoes at least four changes of meaning as it represents different narremes or units of story within the first part of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, and takes on yet further meanings in the 'tavern' section. In *Invisible Cities*, Despina resembles two things, depending on your perspective: a ship (seen from the desert), a camel (seen from the sea). The meaning of the city differs to its two visiting clientele, and we have no notion what third image its inhabitants may cherish.² *If on a winter's night a traveler* shows us metamorphoses of the author: writer, entrepreneur, translator, liar, fraud, sufferer of writer's block. A novel supposedly by Italo Calvino is first attributed to the Pole, Tazio Bazakbal, then to the Cimmerian, Ukko Ahti, and successively to others—Silas Flannery, Ermes Marana, perhaps even the old Indian Father of Stories; as readers outside the frame, however, we know that the embedded incipits are all ultimately by Calvino.

Metamorphosis and transformation are not just random features of cosmic granularity. Boselli (1987) argues that Calvino uses metamor-

² Mengaldo (1975: 423) argues that the reversibility of things is possibly the dominant concept in *Invisible Cities*.

phoses to restore to things their authentic active essences that we keep trying to obliterate with our mental schemas. Rosa sees in the transformations evidence of nature, history, biology, and reason losing their ontological identity as they prove reducible to signs. *Invisible Cities* devotes itself to such comprehensive permutability. The Khan and Polo muse upon whether they be emperor and merchant or two tramps pawing over refuse, and conclude that they cannot be sure which possibility is an exterior and which, a mental reality.

Yet another interpretation of such transformations is to see them as an understated but persistent alternative to death. Change of form replaces death in two of the 'Priscilla' stories of *I zero*. The 'Mitosis' narrator is a cell undergoing division, while the voice in 'Death' is that of a writer imagining his words passing from his mind to computer storage, living on in this new form and bringing about new meetings between his written self and Priscilla when reissuing their story in the far distant future. Cosimo, in *The Baron in the Trees*, symbolically cheats death and its attendant fall from the tree by grabbing the anchor of a passing balloon. He shifts from arboreal to aerial existence and disappears out over the sea in a secularized bodily assumption into heaven; his ultimate fate remains unknown. In 'Under the Jaguar Sun' the narrator is transformed into Mayan victim and also into food for Olivia, yet avoids the death these situations would logically demand. Several narrators of tarot tales appear to have died in the course of their adventures, yet they reach the castle, their 'mutation' being loss of speech. In addition to robbing death of its victory, metamorphosis and transformation also undermine the possibility of absolute meanings or interpretations. By doing so, they set a characteristic stamp on Calvino's cosmos.

Another attribute of the particulate world is lightness. The physical particles dance and change, offering one form of lightness, but more generally, that quality suffuses Calvino's fictive universes and informs the actions of characters, the author's style, and the reader's response. Calvino meditates in 'Lightness' on lightness as a quality prized by Lucretius and Ovid. He declares his own literary mission to have been the subtraction of heaviness from people, heavenly bodies, and cities, from the structure of stories and from language. Even in the relatively early 'racconti' Calvino cultivated a style that prompted critics to talk of agility and dance.³ In the Japanese section of *Collezione di sabbia* Calvino hallows moments when he is made to sense weightlessness—in a girl, in autumn foliage, in a Japanese house. Some of the invisible cities are so attenuated that they seem spun by spiders. Palomar and Marcovaldo are serious to themselves, but we as readers are invited to watch their struggles the way we might watch Charlie Chaplin battle with a

³ For discussion of this dancing style, see Battaglia (1971), esp. pp. 2–4. Almansì (1973: 30), notes that weight and gravity are bad in *Invisible Cities*.

refractory machine; the lightness exists, but in this instance it operates in the reader's perception, not in the fictive world of the text. The arboreal baron approaches life in a manner best called sprightly—the word suggesting his assured lightness.

This lightness of subject and style, the dancing movement of stories and particles, helps protect writer, reader, and the world itself from petrification and stasis. Calvino equates petrification with 'the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them' (*Six Memos*, 4) ('la pesantezza, l'inerzia, l'opacità del mondo: qualità che s'attaccano subito alla scrittura, se non si trova il modo di sfuggirle' (*Lezioni americane*, 6)). Calvino remarks that early in his career he felt that the whole world was petrifying, as if turned to stone by Medusa. He notes the meaning of the mythological answer to this problem: Perseus glides on the lightest things, winds and clouds, and relies on indirect vision, a mirror image, to guide his actions. In the epigraphs to the 'Priscilla' stories, Calvino quotes Galileo on the subject of those who long for the incorruptibility and immutability of the translunar spheres. Galileo sardonically suggests that people fascinated by ideal order would be much improved by an encounter with Medusa.

And there is not the slightest doubt that the Earth is far more perfect, being, as it is, alterable, changeable, than if it were a mass of stone, even if it were a whole diamond, hard and impenetrable. (*I zero*, 58)

E non è dubbio alcuno che la Terra è molto più perfetta, essendo, come ella è, alterabile, mutabile; che se la fusse una massa di pietra; quando ben anco fusse un intero diamante durissimo e impassibile. (*Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*, 248)

Calvino characters often adore diamantine order or are obsessed with it. Calvino's relish for this quotation should help us separate characters from their creator; the latter knows that order can generate repression or petrification.

When confronting a universe without transcendent values, the intelligence must come to terms with the void—be it as empty space, vacuum, nothingness, entropy, or the randomness with which particles collide. When the observer's systems of order are sufficiently powerful to keep particles separable and prevent their merging into a paste (though not so rigid as to petrify them), then—in Calvino's worlds—the void poses no real threat. It exists but produces far less terror than when sensed as an aspect of flux. The comforting power of systems to order experience is seen in 'Il mihrab', one of the Iranian meditations in *Collezione di sabbia*. Calvino muses on the niches in Iranian mosques, massive and lavishly adorned, luxurious but always empty. They point the direction of Mecca, but are themselves unfilled, all their display being aimed at an

absence, a void, or at the inner space of the believer. The emptiness with all its ultimate meanings is there, accessible, almost tangible, yet it does not seem threatening. The articulating frames of the mihrab keep it in order.

Flames are the dancing units of the cosmos in another Iranian meditation, 'Le fiamme in fiamme'. Calvino examines Zoroastrian fire worship and the flame that has burned without extinction for 1300 years. He muses on the universe as a form of fire, on the earth as a molten sphere, on the kindled stars. Behind all this conflagration is the void, both as the space between stars and as the extinction of flame. World and universe are headed to entropic stillness and cold. When the last fire goes out, time will end. Usually Calvino shies away from facing the void, yet this vision of void and fire is quite extended and relaxed. He gives us here the I facing matter and nothingness, armed only with a web of words spun by the imagination. In this cosmos the inquisitive, meditative voice apparently feels no terror. The units stay distinct and the intellect remains analytic enough to avoid *horror vacui*. The leaping flames seen on the one hearth, imagined on a thousand hearths and then in each of the stars—these fires are the dancing units of this cosmos, and the void between actually heightens our experience of the flames by letting us see them. Without those black gaps, there could be no vision of lambent tongues, time, or the end of the universe.

One final characteristic of this imagined universe is the slight but persistent possibility of such Vision-with-a-capital-V, whether holistic, mystic, or significant vision as opposed to mere seeing. Such moments in Calvino are achieved or almost achieved in flashes and do not scale the heights found in the full-blown, dramatic visions associated with drugs or religion. They can be positive or negative, the latter mostly being associated with flux, the former with granularity. Such peak moments when they occur offer no solutions, no reordering of the universe according to new co-ordinates, no heaven; just a sensation of seeing more deeply into the nature of things.⁴ They may coincide with vortices ('Games Without End' and 'The Spiral') or with a moment of consciousness slightly different from others ('The sword of the sun' or 'Le fiamme in fiamme'). Or vision may be fuelled by sexual ecstasy, as in 'The Origin of the Birds'. Calvino never claims any transcendence for these moments—indeed he shies away from such claims in various Palomar stories—but the moments do exalt ordinary sight into something elevated, riveting and unrepeatable.

In so far as the ability to perceive particles depends on the observing intelligence, the substance of Calvino's worlds depends on human

⁴ Boselli (1979: 145) argues that Calvino gives us no trace of Joycean epiphanies. If one defines that term narrowly, he is correct; using it more broadly as a 'peak moment', Calvino offers several.

perception. The failure of human systems of ordering produces flux. In a sense, therefore, reality for Calvino depends on the observer. As we shall see in the next section, paste and its variants provoke anguish and anxiety, and stories arising from reality perceived in that form are haunted by intimations of death and dissolution of consciousness. Imagination has proved inadequate to defend its own existence. By contrast, the granular cosmos we have just surveyed has proved the imagination powerful enough to inscribe itself on the universe. Hence, dancing particles, because their separability can be maintained, evoke lightness of spirit.

Cosmic Paste

Calvino's strange uses of '*pulviscolo*' direct attention to granularity; likewise, in unexpected contexts, we stumble on '*pasta*' or a variety of terms meaning paste, glue, magma, sticky colloid, dough, mud, or glop.⁵ In '*Fino a che dura il Sole*' both space and time are pastes that cling tenaciously. News events filling columns are said to resemble cement being poured into columnar moulds in '*How Much Shall We Bet?*' The paste need not be physical, as we see from these two examples. Calvino applies the same colloidal image as cheerfully to news items as to atoms.

'Crystals' illustrates the centrality and emotional complexity of paste to Calvino's world picture. The original incandescent world of various fluxes horrifies Qfwfq, with its bogs of swirling iron, jets of mercury, boiling fog, and aluminium oceans. When cooling brings crystallization, he welcomes the orderliness. Chaos to him means boredom, while the order of crystals evokes beauty and eros. Order must be truly crystalline, however, to win his approval. The glass skyscrapers of Manhattan are not true crystals, glass being only a paste of molecules, a '*pasta di molecole*'. The inhabitants of these inauthentic crystals are bound by the inauthentic rituals and pseudo-order of consumerism; as one of them, Qfwfq finds life an empty game of pretending to find order in the '*pulviscolo*'.⁶

The complex associations of paste or flux are also laid out in '*Il cielo di pietra*'. Qfwfq rejoices in the molten metals at the earth's core, and hopes ultimately to ensconce himself and Rdix at the very centre, but she is drawn toward the surface, attracted by the strange sounds of Orpheus's music. Much later Qfwfq rises to the surface in a flow of volcanic magma, but cannot locate his lost love because of the noisy chaos of human life, the '*colla acustica*' or 'acoustic glue' of juke-boxes, guitar,

⁵ Vidal (1974: 19) decries Calvino's use of '*magma*' for its being a Natalie Sarraute word and considers *à zero* evidence that Calvino had been 'too long in Paris'. Viscous flux by various names, however, seems much too fundamental to Calvino's world picture over far too long a period to be merely Parisian fashion.

⁶ See Almansi (1971) for a good analysis of 'Crystals'.

ambulance sirens, transistor radios, and radio waves. Surface dwellers accept the noises because they provide what John Gardner's dragon calls, with apropos adjective, the 'gluey whine of connectedness' (1972: 55). Qfwfq pleads to us amidst our din to return Rdix, given that even we must see that our victory of superficiality and noise is really a defeat and a mistake.

In 'Without Colors', pea-green and scarlet and canary-yellow and turquoise accelerate into a verbal vortex as Qfwfq tries to maintain their distinctness against the pull of grey. Likewise, smells in 'The Name, the Nose' form a kaleidoscopic montage that threatens the breakdown of system. The effect of powerful odours causes the narrative strand to segue back and forth among the worlds of a primitive humanoid, a nineteenth-century Parisian sensualist, and a London punk-rocker. In all three strands the sexually desired odour is fiercely pursued, becomes lost in a *mélange* of smells generated by a mob scene, and finally merges with the reek of death. These constitute a paste or flux created in part by stylistic means.

A literal paste or glop enfolds Qfwfq in 'The Soft Moon', as lunar muck squelches down over the high-tech world of an ur-American culture. The components of this alternate America are all industrial: cement, resins, plexiglass, formica, asphalt. These shiny, shapable and discrete materials give way to a substance variously called 'a mud of acid mucus', 'gluey pulp', 'serum', 'slaver', 'gelatin', 'mold', 'gastric juices', and 'cream' ('una fanghiglia di muco acido', 'polpa mucillaginosa', 'siero', 'bava', 'gelatina', 'muffa', 'succhi gastrici', and 'panna'). In this story Calvino brings to the foreground a new element in the basic opposition of particle versus paste. The glop derives from a lunar body whose two codes are 'female' and 'disease': pores and suckers, stretch marks, pubic-like hair jutting from a rift, swelling matter contained by the skin. These negative female associations attaching to the glop seem influenced by Sibyl, the story's other character. She is a predatory, terra-chauvinist astronomer at the outset, and millenia later is fat, complacent and lazy, her sharp mind dulled by her own lipids. This powerful and unpleasant female 'smothers' Qfwfq, just as the lunar glop smothers the world of discrete units and shiny surfaces.

Paste is merely the commonest form that Calvino gives to the mass that threatens the cogito. He relies on four major variants on paste or flux—the ocean, vortices, uncontrollable multiplication of units, and labyrinths. Each adds a different aura to the stories in which it appears. The clinginess of quicksand-like paste, for instance, resonates with nightmarish emotions.

By contrast, the ocean lets Calvino explore the potential of flux without so much negativity. Letting go one's individual identity can even seem attractive in 'Blood, Sea'. Throughout the surface story of petty

human jealousies and vanity, Qfwfq meditates on the kinship of blood to sea water. Compared to the human farces going on in the car, the life of the primitive marine organism is idyllic, literally embodying the 'oceanic' feeling described by Freud.

Usually, however, the idea of relaxing into the void produces too much anxiety; hence we find Qfwfq erecting a barrier between himself and this oceanic existence in 'Le conchiglie e il tempo':

The present came upon me in so many different guises, and I was not able to establish any succession among them: waves nights afternoons winter tides phases of the moon floods dog days; I was afraid that I would lose myself, that I would fly apart into as many pieces as there were pieces of the present bombarding me.

Il presente m'arrivava addosso in tanti aspetti diversi tra i quali non riuscivo a stabilire nessuna successione: ondate notti pomeriggi riflussi invernali quarti di luna maree solleoni; la mia paura era di perdersi, di spezzettarmi in tanti me stessi quanti erano i pezzetti di presente che mi venivano buttati addosso. ('Le conchiglie e il tempo', 260)

In 'The Spiral' Qfwfq enjoys an Eden-like life as gastropod, but feels the need to distinguish his I from the not-I because he wants to impress an attractive female. Palomar struggles to control the ocean intellectually when he attempts to isolate a single wave and understand it in its entirety. He fails. The ocean is also metaphoric; in 'Il mare dell'oggettività' Calvino talks about the modern self becoming lost in a sea of objects, swamped by the sheer number and complexity of artifacts.

Another variant on flux is the vortex, the whirlpool of dust or water, sometimes a depth of reflections. On occasion, plunging into the vortex seems pleasant. Love compensates Qfwfq for loss of self in 'The Spiral', when he is drawn into the eyes of his beloved, sinking through the mirrored hall of retinas to an inner ocean without shores. One can also lose oneself in the infinite reflections of hatred, as in 'Games Without End'. The non-existent knight bears on his shield such a vortex, an infinite *mise en abyme*: a smaller version of the basic heraldic device is embedded at the centre of the shield, and within that smaller version lies one smaller yet. When the ultimate challenge to Agilulf's identity comes, he finds it all too easy to give up his hard-won definition of self and sink into such an abyss. In 'Under the Jaguar Sun' the protagonist is threatened by vortices of sound at the tea party, and teeters on the edge of another atop the pyramid. In 'Ricordo di una battaglia' Calvino describes single moments he is trying to remember as capable of triggering vortices in the sands of memory. Several invisible cities have one or more mirror images or twins, and readers are tantalized by the invitation to sink into the multiple reflections. In 'Il niente e il poco' Qfwfq puzzles over how to value the vortices of powder and tunnels through the void; should he admire the 'something' brought into existence by the Big Bang, or the

'nothing' out of which it came? In 'L'implosione' vortices are Qfwfq's *modus operandi*; he is a star considering, Hamlet-like, whether to explode or implode.⁷ To fall into the abyss of himself seems right to this introvert, but he muses that doing so may result in his transfer via black hole to another sector of the universe, there to explode in flaming screams of another language. Throughout the story he balances on a knife-edge between his current existence and this possible tumble into the vortex that would transform him and reverse his natural tendencies.

In another variant on flux, units multiply until they escape control and overwhelm the cogito. Objects literally rain down on Qfwfq in 'I meteoriti', and their accumulation causes his systems of order to fail. Sounds, too, can bombard one, as in 'Il cielo di pietra'. So can letters, words, signs, and other visual stimuli: 'Everything gets lost in the din of the neuro-ideological bombardment to which our brains are subjected from morning to evening' ('La città scritta') ('Tutto si perde nel frastuono del bombardamento neuro-ideologico a cui sono sottoposti i nostri cervelli da mattina a sera' (*Collezione di sabbia*, 108)).

The labyrinth or maze constitutes the last major variant on paste to be discussed here. Cipolla explains Calvino's fascination with labyrinths as a facet of his Mannerism, but the image derives from more sources than one. The maze emerges in these worlds when the metaphor of granularity merges with that of divisibility: if the observing cogito continues to subdivide its object of scrutiny, basic units become smaller and multiply in number until uncontrollable. A maze (literal or figurative) results. The number of forking paths or units to be explored multiplies beyond the power of maps to chart them. In 'La sfida al labirinto' Calvino associates the maze with industrial culture and with the chief problem facing writers: creating a literature adequate to the second phase of the industrial revolution. Literature reflecting this labyrinth has been written by Robbe-Grillet, Borges, Gadda, Nabokov, and Grass. Calvino points out two possible responses to the labyrinth: to lose oneself in it and insist that being lost is the human condition, or to provide as precise a map as possible, and better yet, to encourage an attitude suited to coping with the search for an exit. He favours the latter.

Mazes figure in 'The Count of Monte Cristo', and by mapping the prison, Dantès is acting the responsible writer. The inauthentic Manhattan of 'Crystals' is called a labyrinth. In the 1960s, Calvino went through a period of interest in structuralist narratology. He explored the possible forkings of narrative, the realizations of permutating a set of givens in 'The Count of Monte Cristo', but also in 'Prose and Anticombinatorics', 'Myth in the Narrative', and 'Cybernetics and Ghosts'. *The Castle of*

⁷ Of course, Calvino's cosmos operates in more than one dimension. According to Capozzi (1989: 79), 'explode' and 'implode' were terms being used by Barilli, Baudrillard, and Marshall McLuhan to define different kinds of artists.

Crossed Destinies creates a crossword-puzzle maze of stories, and threatens the questing intellect with dissolution when that intellect realizes how tentative and unprovable is the nature of meaning and interpretation. The branching out of endless possibilities takes other forms too: Palomar becomes lost in a maze of cheeses. By the time his mind has tried to weigh up history and process and rarity and flavour, he is unable to marshall his wits well enough to give an imaginative order to the brusque shopkeeper. The king in 'A King Listens' is overcome by the multitude of sounds, and spends time wandering in a literal maze, the dungeons under his palace. In a sense, multiplication of anything produces a maze for the mind, and thus many of Calvino's chaotic enumerations equate with either maze or paste by virtue of their burgeoning multiplicity.

Before shifting from the material worlds of particles and flux to the non-material world of the Eye and the cogito, I would like to look for a moment at Calvino's early fictions. Long before he broadened his horizons to include the entire universe, and before he thought in terms of its scientific elements, his protagonists measured themselves against different forms of this ocean or paste.

These prior variants, especially those concerning horizontality and verticality (see Frasson-Marin, 1986), make an interesting contrast to those just considered. In the early works the flux is Feminine. As we move from early works to the cosmical tales, however, the female quality of undifferentiated flux becomes more attenuated and abstract, or simply more positive, as is the case with Mrs Ph(i)Nk₀ becoming the energy-heat-light of the universe. The Other remains Feminine, but resentment and raw personal fear are muted in all but a few stories such as 'The Soft Moon'. *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* is uncomfortably misogynous—witness the attitudes and actions of Cousin—and to Medardo and Cosimo, women and love threaten some form of dissolution. As Calvino's fictions develop, though, woman becomes less dangerous to the protagonists' mode of existence, and the threat becomes more purely intellectual and less bodily than in the early works. However, undifferentiated mass, flux, the world prior to language, and unity continue to bear phantasmic overtones of the Feminine even in later stories, and in some sense remain opposed to the rational, masculine consciousness of the Eye or I who narrates those later fictions.

Calvino expresses such a tension from very early in his career, but the terms change when the material universe and politics become significant concerns in the lives of his narrators. The individual pitted against a mass opens itself to differing interpretations. If that mass represents a community, the separate entity may stand apart as alienated or as heroically resisting a false consciousness, or even just as resisting the notion of total capitulation to the group. If the mass represents the objects that now

define existence, be it materialism or the 'things' that tell the story in a *nouveau roman*, resistance may be philosophical, and Calvino expresses it in that fashion in 'Il mare dell'oggettività'. The oppressive binarism of male consciousness and dissolution into female unconsciousness at once desired and feared thus comes to express very different and clashing kinds of resistance and anxiety and heroism and alienation.⁸

The I and the Eye

Having looked at the worlds of particles and paste, we can now turn to the protagonist confronting them. Rosa (1988: 263) sees reflected in such figures Calvino's own inexhaustible 'drive to define' expressed as the need to individuate, clarify, and give clean outlines to every phenomenon observed. We have already noted the emphasis on eyes and on observation. Although Qfwfq occasionally receives important data through other senses, he is a visual being. Indeed, Calvino calls him 'a voice, a point of view, a human eye (or wink) projected onto reality' ('una voce, un punto di vista, un occhio (o un ammicco) umano proiettato sulla realtà' (*La memoria del mondo*, 7)). The names in *Cosmicomics* are meant to be seen and cannot really be spoken. In 'Dall'opaco' Calvino defines the world as a theatre for eye and ear, but he puts more of his effort into establishing his point of view, with his emphasis on vertical and horizontal lines, on light and shadow, and on the course of the sun. Marco Polo's descriptions of cities have aural elements, but are mostly composed from visual details. Voices and words are also eliminated from one experiential level of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* because the travellers have been struck dumb, and must communicate through pictures. Chapters fill *If on a winter's night a traveler*, and its Readers depend on their eyes for access to the rich fictive worlds. Palomar's eponym is a great telescope, an instrument for precise optical observation.⁹

The protagonists or narrative foci are primarily Cartesian entities. They think, therefore they are, and they exist primarily to think and reason, not to build cities or make money or found dynasties.¹⁰ Their

⁸ Critics who have noted some of the political and psychological reasons for resisting the flux include Cases (1974b), Muzzioli, Raffa, Spinazzola, and Varese.

⁹ This optical, focusing function in Calvino's writing is discussed by Jeannot (1988).

¹⁰ In speaking of Calvino's Cartesian cogito, I do not mean to imply a one-to-one mapping onto 17th-cent. philosophy. Descartes's God is absent from Calvino's metaphysic, for instance. What the two have in common is the definition of self in terms of thinking, the sense that knowledge is systematic, and the analytical method of breaking the total picture down into smaller units to be worked on separately. Particularly in the cosmocomical stories, Qfwfq's metamorphoses emphasize the fact that his central identity resides in his thinking parts, not in his physical form. More generally, Calvino's philosophical stance shares traits and goals with the Cartesian-Kantian tradition. The central concept of mind mirroring nature in that tradition was part of a drive to escape history, and also present in the tradition is the projection of an organic female identity on the universe. For the characteristics of this tradition, see Richard Rorty (1980: 9); see also Susan R. Bordo (1987: 4-5).

forms of cogitation involve finding systems of order such as understanding a city's image of itself, or predicting a novel's plot, or making sense of the world in scientific terms. They try to assimilate what they see, ingest it somehow, and become one with it. Most of them try to communicate their findings. Qfwfq, after all, is narrating his stories to entities of a younger generation, telling them what the old days were like. Marco Polo acquaints Kublai Khan with the cities of his empire. The travellers feel the need to recount their adventures. The two Readers want to discuss the stories they have just read. Only Palomar's observations seem self-contained, until we remember that they first appeared as a newspaper column under such headings as 'Taccuino' or 'Notebook' of Mr Palomar.

The protagonists are conscious of being different from others of their kind. Qfwfq as dinosaur holds himself apart from the New Ones, and as mollusc wants to make sure that his female counterpart will know him from all others. He is also acutely aware that he does not quite live up to his ideal image of himself; a great number of the stories revolve around his bootless love for a female who ignores him or prefers another, or whom he loses because their tastes prove incompatible. Calvino often creates such loneliness by showing personal relationships that do not quite work: see, for instance, many of the stories in *Difficult Loves*. The narrator of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* differs from others by virtue of being a writer. Marco Polo stands apart as a foreigner, as favourite of an emperor, and as a man who has travelled farther than any other human in his time; Kublai Khan too is set apart from the rest of humanity by his rank. The First Reader of *If on a winter's night a traveler* is less obviously estranged from his world, but his insecure and fretful mentality keeps him from interacting easily with others. Palomar feels isolated in a gourmet food shop because his gluttony seems different from that of other customers, and he identifies with unique and lonely beings like the white gorilla. Most of these characters lack significant familial and social relationships, and while a few are married, most of those lack children.

The narrator of 'Glaciation' expresses his isolation through variations on the theme of ice:

the tinkling [of ice] in the glass keeps me company, separates me from the noise of the others, at parties where there are so many people, prevents me from losing myself in the flux of voices and sounds, that flux from which she detached herself when for the first time she appeared within my eyeshot, in the reversed telescope of my glass of whiskey. (p. 46)

The story ends with his approaching her naked body, only to find that the room has been invaded by ice: dazzling white crystals have piled up on the carpet, on the furniture; translucent stalactites hang from the ceiling, solidify into diaphanous columns, between me and her a compact vertical slab has risen. (p. 48)

In addition to liveness and singularity, the protagonists tend to seem disembodied. Qfwfq is often without standard body, and his shifting from one form to another denies him carnal identity. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan are two elderly men sitting still; their contact is cerebral, except for some early sessions when Marco Polo used gestures and leaps because he was as yet unable to speak the language. The characters in the tarot tales are 'cardboard' and 'two dimensional' almost in the fashion of the cards in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; they rarely seem substantial, and while there are narrative episodes featuring lust, thus implying bodies, such scenes are mostly left to the imagination, the tarot decks being used not having obliged with pornographic arcana.

If on a winter's night a traveler is a partial exception to this characteristic disembodiment; both Readers are unusually physical for Calvino, and so are the stories, with their fights, sexual encounters, jogging, and awkward corpses to be disposed of. The voice of the author even tells the external reader to pee before settling down to read. Palomar too has a more tangible body than Qfwfq, though its qualities are mostly noted as limitations. It clumsily tangles with star charts; it shuffles awkwardly in mismatched slippers.

Also characteristic of the protagonists is a strong element of desire.¹¹ The desire may be sexual, but may also be a desire for knowledge, facts, or pattern. For Qfwfq the two often merge; his mental realm and his universe both are haunted by an urgent, tickling sensuality. In part, the very tension created by desire makes the protagonists feel most alive, most clearly differentiated from the flux. Through desire, they ward off dissolution. The loss of desire or the loss of sense of engagement with what they are doing produces a state of mind that inclines toward disintegration. Qfwfq describes such a development in 'How Much Shall We Bet?':

And I think how beautiful it was then, through that void, to draw lines and parabolas, pick out the precise point, the intersection between space and time where the event would spring forth, undeniable in the prominence of its glow; whereas now events come flowing down without interruption, like cement being poured, one column next to the other, one within the other, separated by black and incongruous headlines, legible in many ways but intrinsically illegible, a doughy mass of events without form or direction, which surrounds, submerges, crushes all reasoning. ('How Much Shall We Bet?', 92-3)

E io penso a com'era bello allora, attraverso quel vuoto, tracciare rette e parabole, individuare il punto esatto, l'intersezione tra spazio e tempo in cui sarebbe scoccato l'avvenimento, incontestabile nello spicco del suo bagliore; mentre adesso gli avvenimenti vengono giù ininterrotti, come una colata di cemento, uno in colonna sull'altro, uno incastrato nell'altro, separati da titoli neri

¹¹ For thought-provoking discussions of Calvino's use of eroticism (without sex) and desire as an abstract state of being, see Schneider (1981) and De Lauretis (1975).

e incongrui, leggibili per più versi ma intrinsecamente illeggibili, una pasta d'avvenimenti senza forma né direzione, che circonda sommerge schiaccia ogni ragionamento'. ('Quanto scommettiamo', 176)

Losing his sense of engagement threatens Qfwfq with the crushing of all reasoning. Since he is a Cartesian cogito and must reason (*ergo sum*), consciousness and reason are intertwined; crush the one and the other will disappear. Desire and intellectual curiosity are what produce the tension or engagement, and Qfwfq strains to maintain them, in order to continue to exist as a conscious entity.

These protagonists are all male. They bear the burden of feeling that men must be forceful and decisive, and all exude a muted sense of failure for not living up to this expectation. The discomfort and insecurity over their identity as male perhaps cause whatever they fear to reverberate with overtones of the Feminine; hence the sexualized values attaching to the physical universe; hence also the stress on desire, and Qfwfq's pattern of pursuing the universe to make love to it. Many of these attitudes and definitions of male and female are highly traditional, among the most conventional elements of Calvino's fiction.¹² Interestingly, however, these male protagonists mostly lack an effective will to power. Qfwfq, for instance, is often jealous of his lovers, but surprisingly little of his anxiety expresses itself in terms of domestic ownership, possibly because he possesses no house or property and belongs to no community in which 'his' wife forms a significant part of his status. Even when he does belong to a community, as in 'The Dinosaurs', he does not yearn for or accept the power offered him.

Calvino's characteristic wariness toward power and control is revealingly exhibited by the 'I' of 'Preface—Story'. The simple gesture of turning on the shower prompts the protagonist to think of all the presuppositions to that act. He realizes that reaching thoughtlessly for the knob constitutes a demand that the shower

confirm my position as master of water, to confirm the fact that I belong to that part of mankind which has inherited from the efforts of generations the prerogative of summoning water for itself. (p. 66)

By the time his imagination has soared through several dimensions of human experience with water, he reconsiders his original attitude:

If a moment ago a temptation of titanic pride touched me, as I seized the controls of the taps, one moment was enough to make me consider my delirium of omnipotence something inexcusable and fatuous, and it is with trepidation and humility that I look out for the arrival of the spurt heralded along the pipe by a faint shudder. (p. 67)

¹² Calvino's resistance to changing sexual attitudes has drawn fire: see De Lauretis (1989) for a scathing feminist analysis.

In conclusion, he is content to receive the water, 'not as something naturally my due but as a love-encounter' (p. 69). Likewise for Qfwfq, intellectual exploration of ideas becomes a love encounter, and the material world of water and its systems overlaps the world of human emotions.

Calvino's protagonists are far from uniform. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan are fully mature, whereas Pin is pre-eminently a child. The non-existent knight, Agilulf, is cold, dry, and collected; the young Qfwfq is a bit of a flibbertygibbet, inclined to petulance and enthusiasms; of his older self who narrates, we can only deduce a dry sense of humour. Ludmilla seems more obviously charming than the First Reader, but both are relatively extroverted compared to Palomar. What they all have in common is their observant habits of mind and their ongoing quests for ways of interpreting their chosen forms of experience. The powers and limitations of these activities are strongly affected by the kind of universe which Calvino has projected.

Observing and Interpreting the Cosmos

Consider observation itself. In 'Exactitude' Calvino discusses Leonardo da Vinci's three drafts of the fable about fire. In each, boiling water quenches the fire by overflowing the pot.

Each time he adds some details, describing how, from a little piece of charcoal, a flame bursts through the gaps in the wood, crackling and swelling. But he soon breaks off, as if becoming aware that there is no limit to the minuteness of detail with which one can tell even the simplest story. Even the tale of wood catching fire in the kitchen fireplace can grow from within until it becomes infinite. (*Six Memos*, 78)

ogni volta [aggiunge] qualche dettaglio, descrivendo come da una piccola brace la fiamma spira tra gli intervalli della legna e scoppietta e si gonfia; ma presto Leonardo s'interrompe come rendendosi conto che non c'è limite alla minuziosità con cui si può raccontare anche la storia più semplice. Anche il racconto della legna che s'accende nel focolare della cucina può crescere dall'interno fino a diventare infinito. (*Lezioni americane*, 75)

Leonardo shows us how observation leads one further and further into a world without absolute end. A similar characteristic of observation is illustrated in the first chapter of *Mr. Palomar*. Palomar attempts to separate a single wave from the ocean and understand it in its complex totality. He learns from his travails the impossibility of isolating part of a seamless whole. How do you construct a system of order and impose it? What justifies your divisions? How do you make reality hold still for this treatment?

Calvino makes a related point in a vivid passage of *Invisible Cities*, when Marco Polo invites Kublai Khan to observe a couple of squares in

the chess board. In one mode of thought, the ebony and maple induce reveries about the distant lands whence come the woods; about the mercantile transfers that brought them to one workshop; about the craftsmen who made the board. Operating in another mode, by upping visual magnification, he sees in the wood grain evidence of a frost-nipped bud that never developed into a branch, areas of tight grain bespeaking drought, an enlarged grain betokening a larval nest. In yet another mode, the symbolic, the squares become cities conquered by the expansion of his empire.

'The adventure of a photographer' educates us in the effect of observing a single object—in this case, a woman—and of photographing her hundreds and thousands of times. Calvino sets up an uneasy tension between human interactions and artistic drives, for Antonino becomes obsessed with the visual and totally unable to respond to his model in satisfactory personal or sexual ways. When she leaves him, he is forced to tune his gaze to different dimensions of life, such as things that resist photography and are omitted from the visual field. He finally destroys all his photographs, only to become fascinated with the problems of photographing the trash-bundle so as to convey the complex nature of the contents. He concludes that photographing photographs is the logical extension of his quest. The move from photography to metaphotography is yet one further direction in which acute observation can take one, self-conscious focus on the artifice thus replacing a wholly unfounded assumption of the medium's transparency.¹³

When trying to frame reality, whether as scientist or writer, where can you stop? If you focus on some details, you see *a* system but you lose other details and other systems of meaning. The universe and any of its phenomena are infinitely divisible, and this divisibility, whether concerning events on the level of molecules or football teams, is one of the issues of 'How Much Shall We Bet?' For eons, Qfwfq makes sense of his life by betting on such events as whether bismuth or polonium would be the next element to come into being. These activities lose their appeal as events become more trivial and human, such as whether 22-year-old Giuseppina Pensotti will turn right or left as she leaves her house on 8 February 1926. Not only does Qfwfq lose interest, he starts losing heavily in his wagers. At what point should one stop in one's predictions? When dividing up reality, what separates the significant from the trivial? What bridges between the physical and the human world are valid? These questions are raised in 'How Much Shall We Bet?', their importance sharpened by Qfwfq's despairing remark that as events become a paste, all reasoning is crushed.

Calvino addresses at greater length the problems of divisibility and

¹³ Marco Papa analyses this story in terms of the relation of photography to reality, the Nietzschean pathos of distance, and the link between photography and alienation.

systematization in 'The Origin of the Birds'. A single fact—the unheralded evolutionary appearance of birds during the Jurassic era—takes on different significations as different systems are brought to bear on it. Qfwfq first divides the world into monsters and non-monsters. The bird renders that system inadequate. Qfwfq then tries to cast his adventures in terms of comic-book pictures, and describes the graphics appropriate to each frame. The comics capture some of the ebullience Qfwfq displays in his adventures; they energize the plain facts, and permit post-modernist games of framing and stepping out of the narrative frame.¹⁴ However, the vengeful bird courtiers tear the pictures up at the end, thus depriving Qfwfq of record and indeed memory of what he has experienced, so comics prove unsatisfactory from the standpoint of permanence, not to mention seriousness, science, and romance.

Another structure to give shape to the realities is the folk-tale. The first bird, as animal guide, leads our hero to a lost continent. When Qfwfq sees Org-Onir-Ornit-Or, he falls in love, undergoes trials appropriate to rescuing a captive princess, fails at first and suffers in exile before making his way back to the lost land of birds. He marries the queen, as Or has now become. In the ecstasy of consummating their marriage, he realizes that she is manipulating his mind, that ever-precious cogito. She is wiping his memory of its chief categories: things as they are and as they could be, non-monsters and monsters, yet in that moment of epiphany he realizes that the two are part of a single system. Queen Or wishes him to embrace only the categories of her people, the iridescent images of things that could be, things of the imagination. When she fails to reshape his mind, she turns him over to the attendant claws and beaks, who savage Qfwfq and his comic strip record. The folk-tale turns into horror, but up to the point where Qfwfq refuses to pay the unacceptable price, he is a standard folk-tale quester and Queen Or is a suitable princess. Fairy-tale verities and romantic love are apparently not sufficient to cope with the realities.

Supposing one considers folk-tales and comics childish, one can turn to science. The scientific incipit dryly notes the chronological anomaly of avians, late descendants of reptiles in a world already populated by the more advanced and evolved mammals. But Qfwfq undercuts the adequacy of this approach by contrasting it to the ecstasy he felt at the sight and sound of this singing, flying enigma, with its 'wings feet tail claws spurs feathers plumes fins quills beak teeth crop horns crest wattles and a star on his forehead' ('The Origin of the Birds', 15) ('ali zampe coda unghie speroni penne piume pinne aculei becco denti gozzo corna

¹⁴ Calvino discusses his childhood exposure to comic strips published by *Corriere dei piccoli*. Too young to read the captions, he would make up stories to go with the figures, mixing characters from various strips, putting together several as one story and so forth (pp. 92–3 in both *Lezioni americane* and *Six Memos*).

cresta bargigli e una stella in fronte' ('L'origine degli uccelli', 37)). The urgency expressed through lack of punctuation and the jumbled nature of the list itself are both alien to science's goals of taming the universe and reducing it to simple schemes.

Technology proves no more adequate than science. Technology makes possible the careful photographic record of the sort a scientific observer might make when studying a strange species. Qfwfq finishes his tale looking at a collage of bird photographs, starting with the whole bird, descending to a close-up of its head and then to the eye enormously enlarged. The photos show various levels of reality, and one senses that the process of blowing-up details could continue, by one technological means or other, practically indefinitely. Here reality is a matter of scale, and different sciences reign at each scalar level. However, the two-dimensional, inanimate photographs are not the bird; more important, Qfwfq feels that they fail to capture the essence of his particular birds.

In this story, divisibility is not so much a matter of ever-decreasing scale (the problem addressed by Leonardo and invoked here with the photos), but rather one of alternative systems for explaining reality. Any of several sets of assumptions will produce a means of analysing the fact—the late appearance of birds—but none produces a genuinely adequate means of encompassing the many facets of that reality. All of them contain truths. The love authentic to one level of experience is invisible to the camera, and the photographic approach is inimical to the caricature of cartoons. Slice almost any way you like, and you will get a plausible but limited and ultimately inadequate picture of the material universe and the social world.

Despite the multiple failures, Qfwfq is not depressed in this story; he is restless and driven, hectically cheerful and just a bit absurd, ecstatic and visionary. 'Cangiante', an important word in the story, sums him up: iridescent, with lustrous sheen, one set of hues shifting to another as the point of view shifts. His systems have not worked, but he has created an account of the adventure as a means of dealing with reality, even if that account exists 'sous rature', its verity undermined by Qfwfq's admission that his memory was ravaged by the final violence. Multiplicity here seems more a precious richness of possibilities than quicksand paste.

Dividing the matter observed into smaller units is the method for imposing order that Calvino explores in his last four novels. In *Invisible Cities*, the city is the unit by which Calvino decides to divide up human experience with geography, community existence, culture, and trade. In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, tarot cards provide the narremes of Western literature. Ten novel incipits attempt to present a spectrum of fictional possibilities in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. *Mr. Palomar* consists of twenty-seven meditative encounters with some aspect of the physical world.

With such repeated structures, Calvino seems to be adapting his approach to his own sense of reality, a particulate structure to match a world consisting of particles at all levels of its composition. Indeed, recollecting his comment about a pulviscular utopia, one might say that he was refining to a pulviscular state his attempts to interpret reality. Division does not lead to conquest, but does help break down the otherwise chaotic data into assimilable units. Repeated division into different unit measures allows repeated engagement with a problem from many directions. For example, the cosmicomical stories ask how a Cartesian intelligence can come to terms with the scientific cosmos and not feel destroyed by its scale. Collectively, the tales provide a complex set of possibilities: no single, easy answer, but many potentially helpful approaches useful to individuals in particular circumstances. 'Collezione di sabbia' illustrates in miniature the attempt to match the infinitely divisible world with multiple frames of reference, specifically with literary myth, geology, geography, biography, one's relationship to the flux, and Calvino's own concerns as writer. These several systems, loosely applied, leave us with a sense of having acquired some understanding of sand, even if we would be hard put to say just what.

Assimilation, but not conquest: this distinction is important, for one of the implications of infinite divisibility is that there are no absolutes, no real beginnings or endings, and one cannot produce a perfect system for ordering either matter or culture. The intellectual project of imposing a finite structure on reality must fail of necessity. This, however, does not prevent our assimilating swatches of the cosmos, combining them with orderly patterns, and creating from them our own inward civilization.

The divisible but ultimately uncontrollable nature of things is reflected in one of Calvino's favourite stylistic devices, the list. Such enumerations function in more than one fashion. In addition to anxiety, they can also suggest enjoyment: 'Catalogs of physical objects (as opposed to those of proper names, armies, or genealogies) are invariably the work of a mind that delights in the sensation of experience, in the texture and feel of things, and seeks to communicate this delight to the reader' (Heiney, 1968: 74). Most of Calvino's lists include some bizarre elements to disturb our complacency; others are full-blown examples of the 'enumeración caótica'.¹⁵ The bombarding experiences listed in 'Le conchiglie e il tempo' at least belong to related categories of experience. Moon milk in 'The Distance of the Moon' is more *outré*: lentils, tadpoles, moulds, pollens, starch crystals, combustion residues, and other substances coalesce into a ricotta-like substance. The falling objects of 'I meteoriti' range from editions of the Koran to wrecked automobiles. 'All

¹⁵ The seminal studies that established chaotic enumeration as a topos are Detlev W. Schumann (1942: 171–204), and Leo Spitzer (1955: 295–355). Boselli (1963), Cannon (1985), and De Lauretis (1975) discuss Calvino's use of the topos.

at One Point' compresses into that one point the Vosges mountains, beryllium isotopes, the Z'zu family's laundry, Mrs Ph(i)Nk_o, and all her admirers. The list at the end of Calvino's 'impossible interview' with a Neanderthal Man destabilizes the interviewer's ontology by its assertion of the caveman's total reality and presence and concreteness, while emphasizing the dubiousness of the interviewer's existence.

Particularly when lists come at the end of a story, they tend to create an acceleration into multiplicity, a verbal vortex that mimics the loss of control and the breakdown of an ordering system. We find such acceleration in the final two italicized passages in *Invisible Cities*, where lists of today's cities give way to utopias, dystopias, and the Infernal City underlying them all. Lists can also suggest the richness of stimuli reaching our senses, or the variety of physical phenomena, or the multiple cultural or narrative possibilities. The vortex at the end of Calvino's narration for Mozart's *Zaide* opens up possibilities rather than threatening us with plethora.¹⁶ Much more could be said about the lists, but even this little shows how they exhibit the tensions of his universe.

These very lists illustrate the ultimate incompatibility between systems of order and reality: the correspondence breaks down and even if you string together a long list, you cannot really establish a one-to-one match between the artificial system and the multiplicity it tries to represent. Hence Calvino's later reliance on several approaches used simultaneously or serially rather than one approach developed in depth. As he puts it in his interview with Lucente (1985), he looks for methods to represent complexity. He appears to be musing on one such multiple solution symbolically in 'La forma dell'albero' in *Collezione di sabbia*, when he notes that this astonishing 2,000-year-old tree achieves its end through redundancy, immoderation, and refusal to focus rather than through concentration and refining. As it spreads, trunks metamorphose into branches and branches into trunks.

Calvino addresses the correspondence between system and reality in other terms, using the concept called 'negative space' in the visual arts. In the simplest form of black silhouette on white background, the white, divorced from the black, is the negative space. If three dimensions are involved, the mould which shapes molten metal into a sculpture or machine part is the negative space. In 'Le conchiglie e il tempo', Qfwfq accuses humans of labelling as 'history' the negative space; we decode a sequence from fossilized shells, but the molluscs who made the shells escape us. We value the vase, but not the hand that modelled it. Likewise,

¹⁶ Calvino wrote a narrative frame to link the fragments of Mozart's unfinished opera, *Zaide*. The work was performed in Italy and England in 1981 and 1982. William Weaver produced the English translation. Neither the original nor the translation has been published, so far as I can ascertain. I am grateful to Italo Calvino for sending me a copy of the English version in 1984.

in 'The Spiral', we see the shell but not the love or cognitive novum that inspired the shell's creation. In 'La memoria del mondo', the director of the data-gathering institute muses on his institution's goal—the collection and preservation of every conceivable kind of data on humanity and its history in preparation for the imminent demise of the world. He muses on the kinds of data that are left out, the ephemeral moments such as a yawn or itch which we do not even preserve in our own memories. Once he focuses on the existence of such moments, he realizes that the universe could be said to consist of a discontinuous network of such non-registerable moments, and if so, then the data being preserved is just 'lo stampo negativo' of history, the mould but not the thing in itself. Once you admit that something is left out of your system of order, that omission can form the framework for a different order. It constitutes the negative space around your own privileged version, marginalized by your system but not inferior on that count. Yet again we see Calvino trying to grapple with the limitations that circumscribe any attempt to make sense of the universe.

Calvino's cosmos, then, is one in which there are no absolutes, no ultimate level, no beginning or end, and no fixed categories. His many attempts to come to terms with this cosmos illustrate the failure of this intellectual project, and yet he persists. Observation will produce no complete knowledge, no perfect pattern, but he apparently encourages us to observe anyway. Calvino and several friends once considered starting a journal devoted to human constructs, including attempts to order the universe.¹⁷ We should assimilate reality and internalize it; describe the labyrinth and make that description available to others. To get anywhere with the flux, we need to devise mental schemas as structurally akin to the granularity as possible. Hopeless as it may sound, we need such systems of order even though we know in advance that they must fail.

We need the systems because they are constitutive of consciousness and divide it from the surrounding flux. Calvino associates consciousness with reason, and reason with knowing. He even sees writing as a form of knowing, or as a route to knowing—his is by no means a totally deconstructive vision. Language is still privileged.¹⁸ To be alive is to be conscious, and to lose that consciousness is to die. Being alive and

¹⁷ Cannon (1989) points out that 'although the project was never realized, Calvino's essays on Gadda, Frye, and Fourier reveal the degree to which he identifies with the efforts of the "ordinatore umano" in the most diverse fields. Calvino particularly admired Charles Fourier, the eighteenth-century French utopian reformer whose zeal for classifications rang[ed] from the various types of cuckolded husbands to the various types of commercial bankruptcy' (p. 53). Calvino's original allusion to the potential journal is to be found in 'Lo sguardo dell'archeologo' in *Una pietra sopra*.

¹⁸ In his interview with Luca Fontana, Calvino states, 'I do trust language as an instrument of knowledge, and narrative as a way of producing rationality' (1985: 79). In the Alexander Stille interview, he asserts that 'literature has full status as a form of knowledge' (1985: 39).

engaged is to play out the human drama against a backdrop of paste, or the void, or death. When engagement slackens, the void ceases to be background and merges with consciousness, so to keep it at bay, we need to exercise reason by building systems. Properly exercised, reason and imagination produce a form of existence like dance, a form of living lightness and vision.

Cosmogony, Cosmography, and the Cosmicomical Stories

According to the calculations of the physicist Alan Guth of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, the universe originated literally from nothing in an extremely brief fraction of time: a second divided by a billion billion billions. (From the 'Washington Post', 3 June 1984)

Secondo i calcoli del fisico Alan Guth, dello Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, l'Universo ha avuto origine letteralmente dal nulla in una frazione di tempo estremamente breve: un secondo diviso per un miliardo di miliardi di miliardi. (Dal 'Washington Post', 3 giugno 1984)

(*'Il niente e il poco'*, 209)

With this paraphrase of the *Washington Post*, Calvino commences one of his latest cosmicomical stories, *'Il niente e il poco'*, found only in *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*. Most of the cosmicomical tales open with a scientific incipit, just as most feature Qfwfq as narrator. Like the majority, this one uses a very limited cast of characters—here, Qfwfq and a non-speaking female named Nugkta. Their differences of opinion disturb Qfwfq. He rhapsodizes over the new 'something' burgeoning up out of nothing, while she prefers the austere 'nothing' that preceded it. Qfwfq hastily alters his views to those he attributes to his *innamorata*, but he turns coat in vain. She too reverses her values. In the final paragraph, he refers to 'today' as an era of frozen peas, nylon curtains, and computers, and remarks:

There is a secret that only Nugkta and I know: that however much is contained in space and time, it is only the little generated from nothing, the little that is and yet might not have been, or might be yet thinner, more meagre and perishable. If we prefer to say nothing about it, either good or ill, it is because we could only say this: poor, frail universe, offspring of nothing, all that we are and do resembles you.

c'è un segreto che solo Nugkta e io conosciamo: che quanto è contenuto nello spazio e nel tempo non è altro che il poco, generato dal niente, il poco che c'è e potrebbe anche non esserci, o essere ancora più esiguo, più sparuto e deperibile. Se preferiamo non parlarne, né in male né in bene, è perché potremmo dire solo questo: povero gracile universo figlio del nulla, tutto ciò che siamo e facciamo t'assomiglia. (p. 215)

A typical cosmicomical story, it grows out of the unimaginable: consciousness prior to and during the Big Bang. Other narratives take wing from the first light, the first bird's song, the first sign. Mythological fables that these are, they spin tales of origins, and uncover the hidden traces of those origins in our tangled present. They also lay the foundations for Calvino's 'cosmic vision' or metaphysic, a combination of elements that sets his fictions apart from those of other writers, and separates the pre-cosmicomical works from the rest of his creations. Earlier fiction—*Smog*, *A Plunge into Real Estate*, *The Argentine Ant*, and *The Baron in the Trees*—deal with pollution and politics, real-estate speculation, pest control, and history. With *Cosmicomics*, he throws those subjects out as if they were junk in an attic. In this chapter, I shall argue that he had finally found a means to articulate problems that seemed to him more basic, and had conceived of an effective *mise-en-scène* for exploring them. In these stories we witness the birth of a new fictive universe and the forces being harnessed by writing it into existence.

His discovery consists of a metaphysic that fits his private apprehensions. The eye and I confront particle and paste, and attempt to maintain the separation of the minimal units while arranging them in some regular pattern. The physical properties of particle or minimal unit and flux constitute one component of this cosmic vision. In the earlier fictions, Calvino had explored different, more personal versions of this clash between forces: his protagonists struggled not to be swallowed up by ruinous building costs, by hordes of ants, by constricting social rules, by threatening female powers. By transferring such tensions from the realm of individual action within society to the realm of cosmology and science, Calvino manages to externalize this anxiety. His sidereal language (as Grisi calls it) lets him borrow scientific objectivity and abstraction for scrutinizing human problems. By thus formalizing anxiety, he can explore it.

Particulate reality is one component of cosmic vision; the other is Calvino's new protagonist-narrator. The earlier works try various combinations of observer and agent, none of them able to release much narrative dynamism. We get nameless narrators, immature narrators, or characters marginal to the action such as Cosimo's brother or Medardo's nephew. With *Qfwfq*, Calvino achieves a first-person presence, with all the passion and engagement that that can give. At the same time he makes the noisy young *Qfwfq* remote by placing him in the dim past, by filtering him through an older *Qfwfq*, and by filtering that persona through a phantasmal scribe or creator who refers to *Qfwfq* in the third person: '*Qfwfq recalled*', '*Qfwfq explained*', '*Qfwfq narrated*', '*old Qfwfq confirmed*'. The third person is confined to these italicized expressions—one per story—the merest fingerprint of authorial artifice.

These two removes permit Calvino the distance between consciousness and actions that evidently appealed to him for its impersonality, but the first remove, youth to age, lets him combine the vivid experiences of the one with the reserve of the other. The younger Qfwfq effervesces ardently at the slightest excuse, while his older self subtly withholds full support from those excesses. Meanwhile, the faint authorial presence reminds us that both old and young Qfwfq are constructs.

An abstract setting filled with wonder and strange beauties

a narrator who plunges into life, but is so non-human that we do not import novelistic assumptions about psychology to our responses

a narrator twice distanced, so we do not lapse into simple-minded identification

relative freedom from the baggage of history and society and psychology

freedom from the values and myths imposed by others

The cosmic vision achieves all of these and electrifies Calvino's writing. Compared to earlier work, these stories glisten with excitement. They project uncluttered confrontations between consciousness and cosmos.¹ True, Calvino never entirely answers the questions raised by this confrontation, but he permanently eschews the conventional material of fiction from this time forth—history, politics, society, personal relationships, and the like. Therefore something about this configuration continued to satisfy him, and set its stamp on later work. Symbolic landscapes shorn of society and history constitute much of his trademark. The later works freely admit his dissatisfactions and frustrations, but Calvino no longer seems puzzled. He knows what questions he wants answered, and knows what obstacles impede his quest.

How do we find or create meaning in a material universe? Since we rely on no single fashion, he must go further: what various systems does humanity use? how effective are they? and how defensible are they, intellectually speaking? Naturally the cosmic setting imposes limits on the investigation; so does Calvino's own set of values. Neither one nor the other predisposes him to explore long-standing love relationships or religion or passionate devotion to any cause. None the less, his newly found combination of setting and point of view satisfied his demands for a way of investigating this relationship between the I and the not-I.

¹ Lack of clutter is relative. Gatt-Rutter rightly points out that Calvino carries unconscious baggage. 'Too many of the stories in *Le cosmicomiche* give the stamp of agelessness and a presumed universal value to what are merely the typical behaviour patterns, the trivial *mores*, of Italian domesticity and courtship at the decline of the second Christian millennium' (1975: 334). Similarly Lucente notes that 'Despite the illusion of timelessness that Calvino's science fiction occasionally fosters, these objects [of satiric treatment] turn out to exist not in an atemporal void but in the discourse of society itself, and more specifically, in the social and intellectual debates of the Italian 1960's' (1983: 30).

What his investigation turns up is several public and private means of creating or finding meaning, means such as rivalry and creation. The various means add up to no tidy sequence, no spectrum of more and less effective mental constructions, for they all work for some people under some circumstances. Hence, whether he likes them or not, he scrutinizes and memorializes them, and these will be discussed in the first part of the chapter.

Calvino tried to get beyond these superficial social answers by pursuing two other lines of thought. Following one, he acknowledges the centrality of desire to all that we strive for (including meaning), and looks at the nature of that force. Following the second, he asks why we cannot be satisfied with the myths of meaning provided by science, our prime structure for linking consciousness with matter. These will occupy parts two and three of the chapter. Finally, I shall delineate the effects that finding cosmic vision had on Calvino's fiction. The symbolic dimensions enlarge dramatically. He learned much about the openness of fiction, its 'potential' quality, its multiplicity, from his cosmical experiments.

In short, I am arguing that these fictions triggered in Calvino a major crystallization of values, a new vision, and a set of metaphysical assumptions. Without understanding these changes, we will fail to see the developments in later fictions that stem from them. Furthermore, once we understand what happened here, we will be able to make a more satisfying intellectual bridge between the early stories and the later metafictional masterpieces.

Not 'Meaning' but 'meanings': Making Sense of the Cosmos

Given Calvino's enchantment with patterns, meaning for him often manifests itself as a formal design that enables him to make inferences and find applications. A successful meaning-structure would encompass the individual and make the individual feel at one with the universe. Alienation, loneliness, separateness: these are the hostile conditions the pattern must overcome. They undermine an individual's sense of friendship, the ability to communicate, the feeling of welcome; they destroy any sense of esteem in one's own eyes and the eyes of others. Most of Calvino's narrators exhibit some form of separation from society. Some, like Cosimo, struggle to maintain their distance, while others, like the narrator of *Smog*, are unhappy in their alienation. Their achieving a sense of meaning would reduce or eliminate the gap between self and society; or between their ideal picture of self and the actuality; or between self and the universe. For most of his protagonists, Calvino assumes that inte-

gration would bring happiness, or at least sober contentment, a sense that one's actions were worth their pains, a sense of satisfaction—literally *satis*, enough, the impossible goal of Goethe's Faust. For others, Cosimo in particular, integration would mean subjugation, so meaning has to be sought outside the normal pattern of society.

As suits Calvino's admiration for the patterns of science, he appears to agree with Boethius that one's emotional life ought to have the same regularity and orderliness and beauty as the cosmos.² Life has not obliged him with such Boethian harmony, however, so Calvino contents himself in the cosmicomical stories with studying human struggles to align the self in meaningful ways with that orderly cosmos. Some of his characters derive their sense of meaning from four elements of everyday life: interaction with the community, sexual longing, male rivalry, and physical labour pitting self against matter. Other characters bridge the gap between self and cosmos with three less commonplace activities: creation, geometrization, and vision. At no point does Calvino reject any of the possibilities; he writes to explore, to find options, not to prescribe a single solution. The richness of these stories lies partly in the wide array of possibilities that he offers us—at least the seven I shall discuss, and possibly others as well. In this tactic of considering multiple partial solutions rather than one global answer, we find him using a pulviscular or particulate approach—lots of little solutions to match bits of the problem.

Calvino's picture of *community interaction* is repellent and reflects dissatisfaction with that solution, but he endows it with undeniable power to create a sense of meaning. In 'The Distance of the Moon', the characters shield themselves from the cataclysmic physical events by submerging themselves in intrigue, argument, lust, and the communal activity of gathering moon milk. In 'At Daybreak', Calvino stresses the habitual nature of such familial responses. When something goes wrong, as Qfwfq notes, one automatically assumes that Granny Bb'b is somehow responsible, and reproaches her. The neurasthenic mother cries that she had known all along that something was wrong; huffy father is caught in his usual bind between bossing his wife and children and being bossed by his mother. These jostling personalities might have disported themselves against a background of war or poverty or election-day politics. Calvino chooses, however, to match them against the coalescence of matter and the first light. The family strategies are thus defined by the

² See the *Consolations of Philosophy* I.5 prosa and II.8 metrum for Lady Philosophy's statements that Boethius longed for some such consonance between mind and cosmos. Boethius is arguably present elsewhere in these stories. His theories of 'love' or 'attraction' being the forces of the cosmos seem to be being played out in the gravitational and sexual attractions of 'The Distance of the Moon'. Anca Vlasopolos indeed argues for a very Boethian Calvino when she identifies Love as the prime mover and first agent in these stories.

story as strategies to protect its members against the universe, and to make sense of their experiences with the matter in agitation around them. We find similar ongoing bickering in 'Fino a che dura il Sole', 'The Aquatic Uncle', 'The Light-Years', and 'The Dinosaurs'.

Unpleasant though such jostling and quarrelling may be to contemplate, we note that Qfwfq's families are never cowed, despairing, or psychically enervated. The tensions generate energy that keeps family members going and also limit their awareness and fear of the universe. Calvino grants the effectiveness of this strategy, but shows how the negative emotions prevent the characters from noticing the bizarre loveliness of physical events. Such folk buy their freedom from fear and from the problems of meaning by denying themselves wonder, amazement, and awe. Ignoring matter is the normal response in Western literature; by visualizing the material world so spectacularly, Calvino insists that we acknowledge what we filter out by such a tactic.

Sexual longing, as part of the reproductive cycle, provides one of our most reliable sources for meaning. When Qfwfq is ensorcelled by Ayl or Lll or Ursula H'x or Nugkta, he is thoroughly engaged with the universe. He tries to show its beauties to his love. He gloats over new developments. His *innamorate* never see eye to eye with him in these enthusiasms, but Qfwfq seems happiest when trying to share his bedazzled enchantment at what matter is doing: 'Without Colors', 'Il niente e il poco', 'Crystals', 'Il cielo di pietra', 'The Aquatic Uncle', and 'The Form of Space' all permit him this intense commitment. Because such engagement would not last much beyond physical consummation, we rarely see Qfwfq succeed in his courtships.

Rivalry offers another simple way of making sense of the universe. Qfwfq and Pfwfp start by trying to best each other in collecting new hydrogen atoms, then create and race galaxies in a frenzy of one-upmanship. When Kgwgk vandalizes Qfwfq's first sign, Qfwfq floods space with false signs, that he may gloat over Kgwgk's boorish inability to distinguish true from false. Qfwfq also daydreams a cowboy shoot-out with Lieutenant Fenimore. Unattractive though the rivalries are, they undoubtedly engage Qfwfq strongly with life, and under their spell, he creates signs, atoms, galaxies, shells, and causes eyes to come into being.

Physical struggle with matter itself is another traditional solution Calvino explores. Trying to build something from matter, or sort it, or clean it away, can all give a sense of meaning if such work has clearly defined goals. In 'I meteoriti', Qfwfq tests the housewife's source of meaning by tidying away detritus fallen from the sky. In 'The Soft Moon', Qfwfq helps in the herculean effort that demanded millennia to clean away the lunar glop attracted by Earth's mass, and seems more self-confident as a result.

Calvino stresses novelty so much in these stories that *creation* is a major avenue to a sense of meaning. When Qfwfq brings something new into the world—eyes, signs, time—or even when he witnesses something new like the first light, his enthusiasm endows such moments with a thrilling aura, even when the results are quite different from his expectations. Qfwfq's extruding a shell produces eyes in one story ('The Spiral'), time and history in another ('Le conchiglie e il tempo'). Courtship of Mrs Ph(i)Nk_o produces the universe, but no consummation.

Closely related to the intellectual kinds of creation is the impulse to *geometrify*, to make abstract patterns and enjoy their symmetries as a kind of meaning. Qfwfq as mollusc is involved in some such creation in 'Le conchiglie e il tempo', and he grasps desperately for pattern in 'Crystals', 'Il cielo di pietra', and 'Tempesta solare'. In the last, Qfwfq is a steamship captain, following shipping routes with magnetic compass and radio signals. He cleaves to the patterns much as one sticks to regulation dance steps, enjoying the conventions and feeling satisfied at having negotiated the steps without making a mistake. Calvino's most extensive experiment with geometrification as a means of controlling experience, however, comes in an earlier work, *The Nonexistent Knight*. In the cosmicomical stories, pattern-making is freely undertaken, limited only by one's own vision, and usually harmless. The patterns may become dangerous if imposed on other beings, but in these tales, the designs are elegant and usually satisfy aesthetic rather than practical demands, except in so far as relating oneself to the universe is deeply practical.

Mystic *vision*, or at any rate Vision-with-a-capital-V, is yet another mode of making the universe meaningful. Calvino describes two kinds. One, triggered by love, is holistic and embracing. Mrs Ph(i)Nk_o in 'All at One Point' launches such a vision of the universe in the minds of her admirers: from her nurturing impulse to make tagliatelle comes the world of wheat, veal, rain, the sun and stars, and gravitation—in short, the universe. The second sort radiates less happiness, for it stems from rivalry. Qfwfq and Pfwfp see their enmity multiply out along the curves of space. Similarly in 'The Chase', hunters and prey proliferate.

These are the answers Calvino tries when looking at the individual and the cosmos. He shows that these answers can work, indicates how they achieve their effect and exposes their weaknesses and boundaries. None, however, seems to satisfy Calvino himself.

Cosmicomical Desire

These gaps between self and society, self and one's own ideal, self and the universe all engender enormous currents of desire. Superficially, such flows take sexual form; Qfwfq chases one female elemental after

another, and his urgent sensuality flavours many of the stories. At a deeper level, however, such female objects seem secondary to more ravenous cravings for meaning.³ As one goal in these stories, Calvino seems to have sought to determine how such desire functions within the economy of human endeavours.

René Girard offers a useful paradigm for the workings of desire in his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Broken promises (of happiness, success) proffered by parents, society, or God lead to a sense of self-hatred, alienation, emptiness. One fails to live up to the ideal and assumes oneself to be at fault. The emptiness causes one to imitate some person or ideal, often someone who seems exempt from the sense of loneliness. When copying the model, one longs for those objects desired by that model, and often enters into direct rivalry for them. Such yearning for the object is triangular, involving as it does the mediator as necessary stimulus. Hatred, jealousy, and envy may ensue, and one envisions the rival as a villain, bereft of normal human feelings or insecurities. Girard points out that the desire to make oneself over into somebody else is tantamount to death, so such triangular desire rests on a strong undercurrent of death-wish. In Girard's key texts—the *Quixote*, *The Red and the Black*, and several novels by Dostoevsky—renunciation of such triangular desire is possible. True unmediated desire is also possible, and one may achieve profound peace by recognizing the inauthenticity of a triangular desire. Girard distinguishes between the ways that authors handle this subject. 'Novelesque' authors recognize the inauthenticity and expose it; romantic authors are unable to see that the passions they admire are second-hand and unoriginal.

Several cosmicomical stories vibrate with Girardian triangular desire, 'The Form of Space' and 'The Night Driver' for instance. Lieutenant Fenimore is self-confident, vulgarly bold (at least in Qfwfq's superheated imagination), and set apart by military uniform as somebody with a sense of purpose. Their rivalry for Ursula H's evokes from Qfwfq all the symptoms specified by Girard: the extremes of jealousy and envy, the sense of helplessness, and the projection of the rival as an inhuman monster. 'The Night Driver' shows a more urbane form of triangular relationship, with less evidence that the narrator envies and imitates Z. However, he admits that he would find reunion with Y meaningless were Z comfortably at home and uninvolved. The female, Y, is thus not an authentic object of desire if her presence can be so easily rendered meaningless. As Girard points out (1976: 21), inauthentic objects of desire are often forgotten in one's engagement with the mediator and the peripherality of such objects declares itself in such moments of forgetfulness.

³ Briosi sees this desire as an abstract Sartrean state of longing for the Other.

In 'The Aquatic Uncle' and 'The Distance of the Moon' Calvino dissects the mediated nature of such desires in true novelesque fashion. Qfwfq loses his proto-reptilian girlfriend, Lll, to his reactionary, fishy uncle, N'ba N'ga. We realize that Lll is more status symbol than true love. Qfwfq admires her for her terrestriality, for the degree to which she and her family seem to have distanced themselves from aquatic life. In his snobbish urge to be what he is not, he exhibits all the marks of triangular desire. When we ask why terrestriality attracts him, we find it tied to prestige, territory, and the chance to become someone important. Regrettably for Qfwfq's self-confidence, his uncle is just such a personality with presence. Given Qfwfq's many chronicled attempts to stand out from others, we deduce that such self-definition is one of his most durable longings. Qfwfq denies that he would trade positions with the various impressive presences he has met through the eons: the duck-billed platypus, a dinosaur who survived into the Cenozoic age, a crocodile. His very denial, though, signals that he has thought of such exchanges. He projects onto these powerful entities a fullness and self-assurance which he, in his emptiness, envies.

His longing to be someone who stands out shows up in 'The Spiral' and 'A Sign in Space'. The inauthenticity of his crush on Mrs Vhd Vhd is revealed during their sojourn on the moon: stranded with his idolized, sexually experienced older woman in what ought to have been a rutty adolescent's daydream, Qfwfq finds that he can think of nothing but Earth.

It was the Earth that caused each of us to be that someone he was rather than someone else; up there, wrested from the Earth, it was as if I were no longer that I, nor she that She, for me. ('The Distance of the Moon', 14)

Era la Terra a far sì che ciascuno fosse proprio quel qualcuno e non altri; quassù, strappati alla Terra, era come se io non fossi più quell'io, né lei per me quella lei. ('La distanza della Luna', 113)

His threatened identity and sense of self, in the crunch, outweigh his amorous desires. The young Qfwfq, who howls with the dogs (thus imitating yet something else in his longing for the lady-as-moon), is rarely authentic in his loves; Old Qfwfq, however, who turns the experiences into mythological fables, is a powerful poet aware of the callowness of his young self.

Calvino's insights parallel those of Girard on the subject of male rivals and Qfwfq's repeated longings for inappropriate females. Qfwfq's lovers almost always disagree with him, and as they rarely exhibit the least doubt, their confidence undermines Qfwfq's own search for certitude. According to Girard, the masochism growing from self-hatred is responsible for such misplaced affections (1976: 282-4).

In all these stories, Qfwfq clearly feels that he would find meaning if

his wants were met, but Calvino undercuts this assurance with contrary evidence. Qfwfq may desire crystalline order in 'Crystals', but would lose Vug and her spontaneity. In 'La memoria del mondo', the unnamed narrator wishes his love recorded as a perfect relationship, and sets about murdering anyone whom he thinks to have been his wife's lover, and then deletes them from the ultimate record of reality. Qfwfq as plutonic ruler at Earth's core loses Rdx (Eurydice) because he will not accept her ideals of surface and noise. By maintaining his orderly or colourful or disorderly ideal, he loses its binary opposite upheld by his *innamorata*, and loses her as well.

Qfwfq's moments of peace or visionary joy often accompany the renunciation of a desire. He gives up passing judgement on the universe in 'Il niente e il poco', and expresses wonder and pity at its frail contingency. The ecstasy in 'The Origin of the Birds' shows Qfwfq forgetting his lady while consummating their marriage because he suddenly gains a more authentic desire; his shift of attention is temporary, but in that moment of authentic quest, he momentarily finds a vision of meaning. He reaches serenity in 'The Light-Years' when he gives up hope of winning the admiration of onlookers. There are other moments of ecstasy stemming from different sources; Calvino does not expressly link all such moments to the ceding of inauthentic desire. None the less, the Girardian relationship seems to lurk under the surface of many such moments.

Calvino's analysis of desire differs forcefully from Girard's in two respects. One is the matter of wishing to become like another. For Girard, transformation of self is just a disguised death-wish; for Calvino, such metamorphoses offer genuine alternative existences. Gery calls such imagined survival beyond annihilation of self an escapist fantasy of the nuclear age. Catalano, however, identifies one transformation that is emphatically not a displaced death: writing permits Calvino to transform himself to books and thereby survive death—a process detailed in 'Death'.

Another, more profound difference between the two: Calvino does not accept Girard's solution to these endless desires. Girard authenticates the desire to transcend if one attaches oneself to God. Cervantes, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky all accept this ultimate solution. Calvino does not even consider it, a notable omission considering the widespread success of the religious solution to the problem of meaning. Throughout his career, however, Calvino only fleetingly refers to religion and never explores it seriously. He seeks meanings that derive from the exercise of reason, not faith, and obviously hopes that satisfying some forms of desire would create a sense of meaning. He succeeds in showing the ubiquity of desire, and its compelling power as a source of our longing for meaning, but finds only individual and temporary answers to the problem of meaning that such desire poses.

Science as Meaning-Giving Structure

As a story, science gives us a past: the Big Bang, life emerging in the sea, the dinosaurs. Through its powers of prediction, it gives us a future: control. We adhere to the codes of scientific method and go through the rituals of duplicating results that will permit us to advance understanding. We smother personal impulses in order to develop our objectivity. In the end, what we understand can be technologically exploited. As Jürgen Habermas has argued, if control were not the aim, scientific knowledge as we think of it would have taken quite a different form.⁴ Consider the effects on a culture's science were that society's goal defined as personal happiness or stoic tranquillity. Science is not a universal, but something heavily contingent upon the rest of the culture.

Enthusiastic though he is about science, Calvino is not uncritical. Olga Ragusa (1983: 198) praises his cosmicomic tales as marking 'a kind of final acceptance—in all its consequences—of the Copernican revolution, an inversion in values that Mattia Pascal (and with him Pirandello) had still considered a disaster for mankind but that Calvino is able to dominate with a buoyancy reminiscent of the apparent ease with which space exploration succeeded in finally putting man on the moon'. The buoyancy and acceptance are there, but so too is awareness of 'all its consequences'. Calvino deconstructs some of science's most cherished myths even while revelling in the wondrous images begotten by its theories.⁵

His enjoyment of the images comes across most vividly in the stories of origins. His Big Bang in 'All at One Point' unforgettably humanizes the inconceivable, and lets Qfwfq make sense of the material world. Once Mrs Ph(i)Nk₀ becomes the heat-energy-light of the universe, Qfwfq is residually in love with everything that she has become. First light, first unicellular organism, first sign: these are wonders Qfwfq invites us to appreciate.

Control in science, as elsewhere, has unavoidable political overtones. Calvino seems to have preferred science as an art for its elegant equations and vivid pictures capable of arousing wonder. When science impinges on the political sphere, he clearly found it threatening to the extent that we put it to dangerous uses.

We are shown the political and social drawbacks of scientific prediction in 'La Luna come un fungo' and 'The Soft Moon'. In both, a scientist gleefully predicts a major change, and proves right—up to a point. However, neither Sibyl nor Inspector Oo of the Observatory extrapolate quite correctly; Sibyl does not foresee the millennia of toil and the

⁴ Discussed by Richard E. Palmer (1977: 368).

⁵ For a more gloomy rendition of Calvino's doubts about science, see Illiano; for an analysis that links the scepticism about science and scientific determinism to all of Calvino's other scepticisms, see Lucente (1983).

destruction of her culture that will result from the lunar glop. The inspector mistakes the emerging moon for the first continent, and strands himself on the barren satellite. The validity of science as prime narrative for explaining reality suffers from such miscalculation. In the case of 'La Luna come un fungo', the rest of the prediction causes science to lose further face.⁶ Cities, commerce, skyscrapers, glittering marquees, and bejewelled celebrities come to pass as forecast, but are they any improvement on the aquatic pastoral world? Qfwfq grumbles at their tinsel insubstantiality, their inability to give any authenticity to life. Admittedly, his discontent is presented as an idiosyncratic dissatisfaction; the simpleminded Flw is extremely happy with the glitz and glitter of the technologized future.

In 'Le figlie della Luna', Calvino exposes the hidden costs of science and technology. The high-tech society of an ur-New York discards everything upon first evidence of wear or damage. Everything is spanking new except for the crumbly, maculate moon, a bit of undesirable flotsam overhead. Unable to endure this visible monument to decay, the inhabitants pull the moon down on to an automobile graveyard. Calvino criticizes technology for allying itself to sterility and mindless perfection, because this alliance deprives us of untameable luxuriance, of sexuality as a sultry mystery, and of beauty as something other than cosmetic artifice. The consumer society also discards and marginalizes humans, who are forced to live amidst the refuse in the junk-yard. When the lost Dianas reappear on the renewed moon, the sterile society disintegrates. In what might be a joking allusion to Shklovsky's definition of art as the means of making us see the stoniness of the stone, Calvino shows that stony moon in detail, and then demonstrates that the raddled ruin has more to offer than we had first surmised.

The connections between science and power or control come out most clearly in 'How Much Shall We Bet?' and 'Tempesta solare'. In the former, control is etherealized as money won through the wagers, though we never learn whether the money actually changes hands or is simply a means of keeping score. The reality of power is partly, but only partly, denied: Qfwfq grumbles that (k)yK won the title of Dean through intrigue, and that if it had anything to do with seniority, he, Qfwfq, would be just as entitled, 'though of course it doesn't mean anything to me' ('solo che io non ci tengo'). This asseveration of Qfwfq's, like so many, fails to convince. His huffiness and defensiveness suggest some longing for the power of the title, if only for his ego's sake. The power is there, even if the two gamblers make little evident use of it.

Actual tyranny emerges in 'Tempesta solare' when Qfwfq takes the vicar to meet Rah, an aurora borealis. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice

⁶ Critics who comment on the ways that Calvino undercuts science are Bernardini Napoletano, Carter, and Lucente (1983).

squeezed into a room after drinking from the magic bottle, Rah must curl up in a barn because she is too large to fit elsewhere. When they enter, she is stroking a Rutherford coil as if it were a cat. Qfwfq congratulates himself on this domestic scene. She is bored at the confinement, but 'Look how she has changed: when she arrived, she was a fury; who would have guessed that I could live with a tempest, restrain her, tame her?' ('Guardate com'è cambiata: quand'è arrivata era una furia, chi l'avrebbe detto che sarei riuscito a convivere con una tempesta, a contenerla, a domarla?' (p. 152)). Rah at large is one of Calvino's most magnificent female creations, yet Qfwfq somewhat uncharacteristically can think only in terms of taming and controlling and reducing her. When she departs, he laments her loss principally because he had planned to make from the instrument fragments and 'pulviscolo di vibrazioni' other instruments that would permit him to control and understand solar flares. He wants control and power, and science and technology are his means to that end. We rarely think of power over a natural force as a tyranny, but by humanizing the aurora borealis, Calvino insinuates awareness of the tyrannous in the scientific goal of control.

Calvino also suggests that science as structure for experience provides us with the somewhat contradictory code: we must strive for objectivity but may feel a passionate love for science that excludes other concerns. Such narrow vision and lack of human commitment can make science dangerous. In 'The Distance of the Moon', the deaf one is a highly idealized and stylized scientist who adores the object of his research, and no ill effects result. Inspector Oo, however, hands the fruits of his labours over to the Pirate Bm Bn with the archetypal denial of social responsibility, 'sono un tecnico'. He does not care how his predictions are used so long as he can make extrapolations and be recognized as an official scientist of the regime.

By putting the four lunar stories together, as Calvino does in *La memoria del mondo* and *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*, he exposes another weakness in the scientific narrative. The four versions of the moon's development are mutually exclusive, but elements in each have been taken seriously by respected scientists at one time or another as hypotheses of lunar genesis. Qfwfq participates in all of them, so by thus grouping the stories as fragments of Qfwfq's biography, Calvino slyly implies that all are true. He impossibly legitimizes them all as our geological prehistory. Calvino thus teases us with the tenuous relationship between scientific hypothesis and reality, and with the unstable and erratic development of scientific theory. How happy can we feel about meaning derived from matter in the form of science if the next generation will invalidate our scientific narrative? Moreover, even while he deftly undoes scientific histories, Calvino seems, here and elsewhere, to uphold science as the best story about matter which we have found so far, best

in terms of its power to explain, but best too for its daring and vivid scenarios. By creating these bizarre tales, he shows us the virtually untapped power of science to generate story through such extraordinary images as the moon being torn from the Pacific basin.

To round out Calvino's views on science, we might note that he explores science as a narrative in the incipits to the cosmicomical stories, and each of those fictions is, in a sense, a reproof to the scientific narrative style. Something is lacking in the dryly 'objective' pictures, something that makes us sensitive to the wonder.

Most writers considering an extant system of meaning either accept it or attack it; Calvino prefers to look at both its strengths and weaknesses. The strengths here seem to be wonder and elegance, the myths of origin, the power of the protocols, when followed, to produce desired results. The weaknesses are a specious coherence, wavering correlation between theory and material reality, and potential for political misuse. When coupled to a deft, vivid imagination, science liberates us; when meshed with tyrannous impulses, it implicates us in illegitimate control of others. Calvino usually shows his science-literate characters like Sibyl and Inspector Oo as narrow and obsessed creatures, not beings with a full range of human concerns, but he also shows very few such specialists. Possibly this reflects his awareness of the small percentage of people who derive their sense of meaning from science, and warns us that the failure of human imagination shown by a few such scientists may have disastrous implications for all.

When we view the cosmicomical stories as enquiries into the nature of meaning and the modes of finding meaning open to us, they prove rich and complex. However, they proffer no easy answers, and indeed no single answer. Even as Calvino believes only in a 'pulviscular' utopia, so too he seems to prefer a 'pulviscular' answer, something broken into particles, each one matched to a minor situation or to an individual at a particular time. We find here clouds of possibilities, and our problem is to find some that work for each one of us some of the time.

All told, Calvino explores many modes of engaging oneself with life. Desire is most central because it creates the longing for meaning as well as offering some ways of satisfying that longing. When Qfwfq is in hot pursuit of some goal, be it a female or an ideal, he feels engaged and suffers little from alienation or lack of purpose. Finding a means of keeping desire alive seems central to Calvino's outlook when he thinks in cosmicomical terms. He seems very aware that short-term desires, once satisfied, refuse to function in a meaning-giving fashion, and long-term desires either die of inanition or, once satisfied, leave a formidable emotional gap. Science—in its limited but mostly admirable way—avoids these pitfalls because the desire to know everything can never be met, but there are countless short-term goals, units of knowledge to be

acquired. In his later works, particularly *Mr. Palomar*, he will explore the observative habit of mind necessary to make such a scientific sense of meaning operate.

Expanding Universe, Expanding Fictions

In addition to describing various kinds of search for meaning, Calvino learned to write what might be called literature of multiple meanings—one result of his myth-like settings. William Righter makes a relevant point when discussing the function of myth in literature: 'the importance of myth in a "demythologized" age is not simply to provide us with the now missing sense of an ultimate frame of reference, but to provide an area of almost deliberate uncertainty as to what such frames might possibly imply.' (1975: 96–7) 'Deliberate uncertainty' and 'imprecise intelligibility' (as Righter later calls it) invite multiple readings. Calvino's early works had relatively close horizons and local scenes and hence little imprecision or uncertainty; from *Cosmicomics* on, that changes. This expansion of the fictional meaning structures is my next concern.

Certain legends with mythic content have had astonishingly long lives. Each successive generation can reread the story to suit its own needs because of this openness of form and imprecise intelligibility. Orphic writers may stress their bard's power over beasts, trees, and stones; his trip to the underworld (land of the dead, dark night of the soul, insanity, dystopia); his dismemberment at the hands of intoxicated maenads (including his mother); or the prophetic powers of his severed head. Generations of Western writers have brought into the foreground different elements in the story to serve diverse ends: Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasizes the first; Nerval, Rilke, and Mallarmé the second; Thomas Pynchon and Ihab Hassan the third; Russell Hoban and Jerzy Kosinski the fourth—to name only a handful. This openness of form leads to contrasting poetic creations and to very different readings of any single work. I mention Orpheus because Calvino himself has written in an Orphic vein in the cosmicomical stories and elsewhere; one finds much the same spread of emphases in Oedipus fictions too. What I wish to delineate here, though, is the way in which Calvino's stories open themselves to many kinds of reading. Their structures invite us to attach meanings significant to us. Their 'deliberate uncertainties' invite at least two kinds of mythological approaches, and also metafictional readings, political and historical understandings, and 'American' as well as 'European' allegorizations. To my way of thinking, this expansion of horizons and expansion of symbolic richness was what transformed Calvino from being not just an Italian or European man of letters, but a figure on the international literary stage.

A few of the fables are mythological in a classical sense. Heiney (1971) notes that Orpheus, Pygmalion, and Endymion are being rewritten, with all the enrichments that such recycling implies.⁷ Milanini (1990: 108) sees traces of Demeter and Diana as entering via well-known surrealist images.

Less commonplace, however, is a second kind of mythological identity. One is reminded of myth in the first place because so many of the stories describe origins: the first light, the first sign, the Big Bang. One can read many of the cosmicomical tales as mythological fables. How did fish move up on land? How did dinosaurs die out? How did colours enter the world? These in turn can be enjoyed as sophisticated modern recasting of a primitive form. Or, if one ignores the differences between a primitive oral mythology and an authored artifact, one can apply structuralist techniques derived from Lévi-Strauss's Amerindian studies. The binary oppositions found in most of the stories consist of the I versus the not-I, or self versus cosmos as the primary dichotomy, but secondarily male versus female, for the Other is significantly feminine for Qfwfq. The repetitions consist of Qfwfq's launching himself against the universe time and time again, seeking to satisfy desire and achieve satisfaction. The mediation—that which represents the sacred in this cosmos—is metamorphosis or change. Metamorphosis largely replaces death in this mythology, and offers us one way of transcending it.⁸

The cosmic setting, because free of specific connections to our world, is open to allegorical readings. Numerous critics, responding to this openness, have obliged us with metafictional readings. 'A Sign in Space' speaks of Calvino's need for 'new signs' when he looked at his previous work, particularly the neo-realist fictions (Terracini). 'The Dinosaurs' represents a rejection of the *nouveau roman* (the new ones) but also admits to having outlived neo-realism, and to wanting something fresh (Pedullà, 1968). Qfwfq's extruding his shell to attract a female mollusc in 'The Spiral' allegorizes the relationships among writer, text, and audience, and Qfwfq of 'Il cielo di pietra' is defending a writer's interior values against those of action in the exterior world (Bernardini Napoletano, 1977: 96–108). Mapping the labyrinth in 'The Count of Monte Cristo' corresponds to writing fiction (Boselli, 1969), and Calvino's own 'Sfida al labirinto' supports the reading of Dantès as modern writer, producing literature that maps that labyrinth with an eye to possible escape. Such metafictional readings are most elaborately developed by Rocco Capozzi, who sees all the cosmicomical stories as

⁷ Calvino produced a version of 'Il cielo di pietra' that is even closer to the classical myth; its narrator is Pluto instead of Qfwfq. I have not found an Italian version; the English is 'The Other Eurydice'.

⁸ See Hume (1984) for such a structuralist analysis. For the particular structuralist approach used, see Edmund Leach (1973: 317–30).

concerned with such self-referential matter, especially those tales that reflect Calvino's preoccupation with old and new, tradition and novelty. 'The Origin of the Birds' satirizes the Italian critics, and 'L'implosione' celebrates two modes of being: implosion and explosion—terms derived from Barilli and others, who used them to describe 'two opposing forms of expression of writers and artists' (Capozzi, 1989: 79).

Nor is the cosmic setting the only stimulus for multiple readings. So is the suggestive strangeness of Qfwfq himself. Despite Cannon's assertion (1981: 53) that the only unity to these stories is the strictly grammatical persona of Qfwfq, others have seen Qfwfq as an entity capable of development. Di Felice traces a Piaget-like evolution of mental powers for coping with experience, and her observations were triggered by Bouissy's likening Qfwfq to the hero of a *Bildungsroman*, with all that that implies about growing up and becoming adult. In contrast, Ernest L. Fontana (1979) argues against such a developmental vision and insists that the fables are arranged randomly because Calvino's universe is ever-changing and never fixed; there is no teleology, no real beginning and no end. Since these arguments are not based on the final life-time arrangement, they are at best limited to the original collections, but the accumulating diversity testifies to the openness of the abstract symbolism of these little mythological fables.

Yet another kind of reading to emerge from these suggestive structures is based on traditional literary topoi. Stories pitting old against new reflect the ongoing struggles of those forces whose avatars include ancients vs. moderns and classicism vs. romanticism. Play with the literariness and even the letters of a text are analysed by Biasin (1985) for 'The Form of Space'. We find the hoary assurance that literature can grant immortality being delivered with a new twist in 'Death'. 'La memoria del mondo' pits the 'happy ever after' topos against computer data-gathering in order to make us see the damage done to some minds by trite fictional formulas.

We have already seen how these stories can be read as a complex comment on science as the meaning-structure and myth of our era, and I have argued elsewhere that the stories also comment on the interplay of science and imagination (Hume, 1982). In addition to science, however, we find readers invoking politics and history as grids for explaining these stories. This is especially true when old ways are contrasted to new.

Qfwfq as dinosaur remembers his folk as lords of the earth: 'if you were a Dinosaur in those days, you were sure you were in the right, and you made everyone look up to you' ('The Dinosaurs', 97) (allora essere dinosauro si aveva la coscienza d'essere nel giusto, e ci si faceva rispettare ('I dinosauri', 21)). The saurian's stance is that of an aristocrat bemoaning the old days; or that of someone in the power structure of an empire fallen on hard times. When teaching the story to American

students, I find they identify the dinosaur-narrator with the expansive American of the 1960s, given to conspicuous consumption and spend-thrift, 'gas-guzzling dinosaurs'. Any of these work reasonably well within context. The Old One and New One dichotomy, to American students, also makes sense in terms of those from the Old Country and their Americanized offspring who speak only English. I doubt very much that Calvino had these American identifications in mind, but this proves my point, namely that the stories have an open enough structure and landscape that readers can relate to them on the basis of all kinds of backgrounds.

The same kinds of referents apply to 'At Daybreak' and 'The Aquatic Uncle', where we find tension between an older generation whose values are rural while their grandchildren are city folk concerned with the newest fashions rather than the old ways. 'Il niente e il poco', with its pity for the fragile contingency of the 'something' can be read as the narrator looking at the fragile, contingent political order to come out of the chaos of World War II; after berating that order for its flaws and weaknesses, he feels compelled to forgive the faults when he looks at the 'nothing' and the forces of chaos that are its antecedents and possible alternatives.

I have explored these multiple readings at such length to make a point. The cosmical stories differ in a fundamental fashion from earlier Calvino fictions, and that difference stems from the abstract, symbolic setting so open to possible meanings.

Calvino accomplishes a great deal with these little stories. He found a narrative stance that satisfied his desire for something more centrally active than mere bystander, but not just first-person protagonist, with the demands that would have made for more psychological depth. He reaffirmed the experience of his earlier fiction that conventional social and political answers to the question of meaning would not satisfy him. Sex, social interaction, rivalry, and physical labour do help establish links to the cosmos, but not links he could trust. Desire loses its tension too easily; social interactions work by narrowing one's horizons; rivalry leads to ugly behaviour; and the physical labour with matter becomes less interesting than the matter itself. Vision is delectable, but comes in unheralded flashes and cannot be tamed and expanded. Geometrization is shown to rely on dangerous rigidities, but Calvino will continue to explore this option in later fiction. He also continues, by the nature of his enterprise as writer, to explore creativity as a method of achieving a sense of meaning.

By ingeniously stripping his material to the barest essentials—a self and a universe—he was able to see why conventional answers seemed inauthentic to him. Given our craving for meaning and the sense of dissatisfaction which is its symptom, he probed desire in some depth, and

came to realize through these stories that he was unlikely to find a truly fulfilling answer. Indeed, he found that desire unfulfilled may be as close as one can get to the feeling of engagement that reduces the need for abstract meaning. The only way he found for perpetuating that sort of commitment was pursuing a superficial series of goals—Qfwfq's *in-namorate*—or the more cerebral set of infinitely unfolding goals set by science. In his later fictions, he will explore other large systems like science—literature, empire—other networks that break down into innumerable particles or lesser goals that point toward a larger order.

He also learned how to write with sufficient symbolic resonance that his stories rose above whatever specific issues were engaging him, and became open to multiple readings. Hence, the title for this chapter: Cosmogony, Cosmography, and the Cosmical Stories. These little short stories—thirty-four in all (if you count the 'Priscilla' stories as three)—represent a cosmogony in the sense that a new fictive realm is born, a fictional landscape new to everyone and a new configuration of values specifically within Calvino's canon. In that they document the coming into being of both the physical cosmos and of this literary cosmos, they are cosmographies. An act of the gods and the act of a chronicler: Calvino has achieved both.

Identifying the Labyrinth: From *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* to *Marcovaldo*

On the one hand there is the attitude needed today for confronting the complexity of the real, for refusing the simplistic visions that do nothing but confirm our habitual ways of representing the world; that which we need today is as detailed as possible a map of the labyrinth. On the other hand, there is fascination with the labyrinth as such, with losing oneself in the labyrinth, and with representing this absence of exits as the true condition of man.

Da una parte c'è l'attitudine oggi necessaria per affrontare la complessità del reale, rifiutandosi alle visioni semplicistiche che non fanno che confermare le nostre abitudini di rappresentazione del mondo; quello che oggi ci serve è la mappa del labirinto la più particolareggiata possibile. Dall'altra parte c'è il fascino del labirinto in quanto tale, del perdersi nel labirinto, del rappresentare questa assenza di vie d'uscita come la vera condizione dell'uomo.

('La sfida al labirinto', 96)

In his famous challenge to the labyrinth issued in 1962, Calvino outlines two literary choices. Authors may devote their energies to mapping the labyrinth, honest about the apparent lack of exit but ever alert for rumours of new passageways. Alternatively, the maze ensorcells them, in which case they proclaim that no egress is possible, and that life really is a labyrinth without exits. The latter group includes writers of the 'nouveau roman', who melt into their sea of carefully described objects. Calvino identifies with the maze-mappers, who cast about for new ways. Dantès is just such a cartographer in Calvino's 'The Count of Monte Cristo'. An unquenchable drive to find or blaze new paths gives shape to *Invisible Cities*, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, and *Mr. Palomar*. In the early works about to be discussed, however, Calvino was still struggling to conceptualize the maze in ways that suited his mental patterns and literary tastes. He had to identify *his* labyrinth before he could explore it effectively.

We have learned to recognize the images of particle, paste, and

engulfment that generate Calvino's mindscapes. We have seen how a slightly distanced protagonist-narrator and the ahuman cosmic setting produced tremendous gusto in Calvino's explorations of the cosmic labyrinth. Much less optimism energizes the pre-cosmical works. Calvino apparently needed the condensation permitted by symbols such as particle and paste if he was to see patterns; in these earlier works, he is too close to the messy details of the human realities he observes. Like an information specialist, he needs the right fractal to store an image before he can operate upon that image; condensation made possible by an apt formula is needed to empower creative endeavours.

To facilitate analysis, this chapter considers the early works in four groups according to the problems Calvino was setting himself and the solutions he was testing. The first consists of *The Argentine Ant*, *Smog*, and *A Plunge into Real Estate*. These three define reality as a spectrum ranging from material reality to social reality; *The Argentine Ant* and *A Plunge into Real Estate* represent the poles, while *Smog* falls somewhere between them, its protagonist struggling with both material and social reality. Calvino shows the pitfalls of trying to wrest meaning from these matrices and in each asks what values should or can be upheld.

The second group includes *The Watcher* and *Marcovaldo*, both of which show misguided attempts to simplify reality. In the course of examining ways we derive meaning, Calvino finds himself challenging some social myths as false patterns. Such use of falsely simple patterns raises questions for students of Calvino because he himself relies so heavily on simple patterns. How does one distinguish the helpfully simple from the deceptive?

The third group includes *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* and *The Nonexistent Knight*, both of which focus on the loneliness and incompleteness of the individual, and on desire to integrate with a group. Again we find alienation, but in these instances human and social answers are being tested, not abstract conceptualizations.

The last group consists of *The Cloven Viscount* and *The Baron in the Trees*. These likewise focus on the individual and on the problems caused by desire to integrate with humanity. However, in these two stories the force threatening to engulf the protagonists is more overtly feminine than elsewhere, and yet oddly these protagonists are more successful than others in finding some kind of happiness. Since these two stories alone have relatively cheerful endings, one supposes that Calvino found their answers appealing. However, he was unwilling to use those answers ever again. These stories, therefore, express important forces and even contradictions in Calvino's values, and must be understood before we can see why he went in the abstract and symbolic literary directions that he did.

Landscapes Pastoral and Social:
*The Argentine Ant, Smog, and A Plunge into
 Real Estate*

The unnamed protagonist and his wife hammer their fists against material reality in *The Argentine Ant*. They move to a country town, expecting life to be nicer and jobs not too hard to find. They are poor, have a sickly baby, and suffer from unspecified problems that darken their outlook and dampen their spirits. Evidently their marriage is not in the best of shape. This novella chronicles their growing comprehension of the unbearable enemy occupying the pastoral setting: the hordes of ants.

These insects are not a 'concrete enemy that could be numbered, weighed, crushed' but 'an enemy like fog [nebbia] or sand [sabbia], against which force was useless' (p. 151). They constitute an opposition that has become paste-like through multiplication of the small units: 'nebbia' and 'sabbia' are non-numerables, mass nouns for an uncountable number of small things.

The narrator nominally participates, but in fact does little more than examine the reactions of others. He observes his wife's anguish and irritation at their intolerable situation; he listens with fascination to Captain Brauni's gleeful boasts of a system for killing two thousand four hundred ants per hour. Calvino charts the failures of several systems. Poisons seem worthless; Brauni's mechanism is ineffectual against the sheer numbers; bait laid down by the local authorities nourishes the pests; Signora Mauro's recommendation that everyone sweep and dig is clearly insufficient though ants are less in evidence around her than anywhere else. Such a list of failures shows Calvino mapping a labyrinth of dead ends.

Accompanying the account of ant infestation is a melancholy subtext of personal alienation. The protagonist feels a difference between his family and the natives. The loungers, like his Uncle Augusto, seem at peace with themselves—body and spirit at one. The narrator cannot even enjoy day-dreaming because his wife is opposed to fantasy, and he can no longer intoxicate himself with words and thoughts because her face comes to his mind. Rather than wage an endless and hopeless campaign against ants, the narrator wishes simply to withdraw psychically and endure. Hopeless, helpless, unhappy, and not eager to exert much effort, the narrator cannot even make his life meaningful by fighting a foe.

This brilliant story derives most of its power from the stolid grotesquerie of the infestation and the contrasting emotional ferment of the human responses. The narrator's depression and the unsolvable nature of the problem make readers long for relief from the tensions of the story. In seeking such release, readers may seek an interpretive way out of

the labyrinth. Does the endless fight against ants allude to an endless political fight against, say, inequities or corruption? An allegory is easier to tolerate than the unforgiving physical facts. The possibility, though obvious, is unconfirmable because Calvino invests the story with such vivid material reality. We can distance ourselves (as I am here) by focusing on the author's philosophical investigation of meaning as struggle with physical existence, but that too pales when we remember the insect hordes. Calvino does attack a similar problem on both physical and philosophical levels in 'The Soft Moon', but such symbolic distancing is not so clearly present in *The Argentine Ant*.

The story drives us back to the ants; they cannot be explained away or allegorized. They are simply an intolerable problem. People's responses are silly and ineffectual but necessary for personal sanity. The narrator's depression and alienation solidify as he absorbs the incurable, festering nature of the situation. And yet, Calvino ends the tale on a curiously tranquil note. The narrator and his wife walk down to the sea, enjoy the cool breeze, note the absence of ants, and feel something:

The water was calm, with just a slight continual change of color, blue and black, darker farthest away. I thought of the expanses of water like this, of the infinite grains of soft sand down there at the bottom of the sea where the currents leave white shells washed clean by the waves. (p. 181)

L'acqua era calma, con appena uno scambiarsi continuo di colori, azzurro e nero, sempre più fitto quanto più lontano. Io pensavo alle distanze d'acqua così, agli infiniti granelli di sabbia sottile giù nel fondo, dove la corrente posa gusci bianchi di conchiglie puliti dalle onde. (*La formica argentina*, 126-7)

Gore Vidal gracefully admits, 'I don't know what this coda means. I also see no reason for it to mean. A contrast has been made between the ant-infested valley and the cool serenity of mineral and of shell beneath the sea, that other air we can no longer breathe since our ancestors chose to live upon the land.' (1974: 15).¹

A few cosmicomical tales shed retrospective light upon the coda. The shells being ground down by sand will reappear in Qfwfq's attempts to distinguish himself and impose order on flux. As conch or mollusc narrating 'Le conchiglie e il tempo', Qfwfq boasts of creating time and history with his shell, but laments that mankind benefits, not the creatures whose shells make up the continental crusts. The shells in *The Argentine Ant* are being scoured by the infinite, tiny granules of sand, and we remember that the ants are an enemy like sand. The whiteness of the shells and the shells' emptiness are two of death's many semes, but

¹ Vidal also says, 'Calvino's first sentence is rather better than God's "in the beginning was the word"'. Vidal tells us that this masterpiece gives us the human condition 'in spades. That is, the human condition today. Or the dilemma of modern man. Or the disrupted environment. Or nature's revenge. Or an allegory of grace. Whatever . . .' (1974: 14). Note that he senses a symbolic dimension, but cannot pin it down.

the picture also invokes tranquillity. Whether we struggle or not, we will be ground down to the basic paste of all matter some day—that seems to be one subtext of the coda. The tone of this ending is not upbeat or heartening, yet somehow it achieves the momentary release of acceptance.

In this story, Calvino found an image for struggle with matter that was wonderfully compelling but which also defied any plausible resolution on the level of action in the physical world. However, he does relax the fictional tensions by portraying the tranquillity of the young couple. Their momentary lift of spirits at sight of nature is one of those shifts of consciousness that Calvino will also exploit in the cosmicomic narratives. The calm makes questions of meaning seem irrelevant for the moment. One finds more joyful versions of that shift in 'Blood, Sea' and 'The Spiral'.

With *Smog*, Calvino investigates a similar problem of how to derive meaning from struggle with matter. He ends the story on a very similar note: spirits momentarily lift at a sight seen in the heart of nature. Such at-one-ment with nature accounts for the many critics who mention a Rousseauvian strain in Calvino's thought.² The alienated protagonist is also cynical without being able to enjoy his own cynicism. His constant engagement with matter takes the form of fighting the gritty industrial effluvia that pollute his city. He is forever washing his hands, changing his shirt, putting down a book because the filth begriming his person distracts him from reading. His moment of escape consists of seeing laundry being washed outside the city, seeing the white sheets spread to dry in the green fields. The narrator remarks: 'It wasn't much, but for me, seeking only images to retain in my eyes, perhaps it was enough' (p. 137) ('Non era molto, ma a me che non cercavo altro che immagini da tenere negli occhi, forse bastava' (*La nuvola di smog*, 81)).

Whereas any allegorical dimension of *The Argentine Ant* remains indistinct and not demonstrable in the ways that most literary interpretations can be 'demonstrated', we find a different symbolic balance in *Smog*. The cloud of pollution mentioned in the title refers at least as much to a political and moral pollution as it does to the gritty dust. The protagonist edits *La Purificazione*, a journal devoted to problems of pollution, but it is published by a magnate whose factories are the prime local polluters, and as editor, the protagonist is unhappily forced to tell his boss, Cordà, what Cordà wants to hear. This conflict of interest forces him to write in upbeat ways about how pollution will be conquered, or about how pollution is a natural and very minor phenomenon attached to the financial miracles of industrialization. Cordà himself is difficult to fathom; he wants positive articles, but rejects several obviously fatuous

² Among critics to call attention to this Rousseauvian vein with regard to this or other stories are Addamo, De Mara, and Woodhouse (1970).

arguments, and he occasionally seems to take the journal seriously, despite the nature of his industrial empire. Yet he is, as the narrator remarks, the smog's master. He distributes the grime throughout the city.

One might argue that the narrator is triply enmired in smog, since his depressive state of mind is yet one further source of pollution in his life. He sees the worst in everything. He makes no real contact with others and indeed goes out of his way to avoid striking up conversations in restaurants. He despises his room, the city, and his work. The one bright spot in his life is Claudia, a self-centred, intensely vital, upper-class beauty who has somehow fallen for this nonentity. She breezes into his life from time to time, and miraculously none of the dirt or grit can cling to her. The ash on his bedsheets does not smutch her milky skin. Her apparent indifference to filth makes us wonder if the protagonist is unbalanced on the subject, though we are aware that she is so wrapped in self (and so well supplied with suitcases stuffed with fresh clothes) that she simply may not see what it means to live with the nuisance on a normal scale of income. Her cheer makes us wonder, though, how much the pollution is an emanation of his depressed mind.

Pollution manifests itself in yet a fourth, shadowy fashion. Although warned against mentioning radioactive fall-out, the narrator justifies his interest because it is a form of air pollution, and soon every article makes some reference to it. Nobody notices, or everybody has become inured to the thought of such a peril. The pollution is therefore also a global herald of apocalypse as well as a local physical irritant.

As in *The Argentine Ant*, Calvino has set up a struggle with matter so vivid and apparently insoluble that no resolution presents itself. The narrator finds no help in politics: the one personal contact he makes, a skilled factory worker, exposes him to a union-organization meeting, where the smoke from pipes and cigarettes joins with fog coming in through the window to produce one more polluted miasma of dense atmosphere and endless words. Working to clean the city air is no answer; one could close factories, but that would put thousands out of work and bring the economy to a halt.

All the protagonist can find to hope for is 'a new image of the world which would give a meaning to our grayness, which would compensate for all the beauty that we were losing, or would save it. . . . A new face for the world' (*Smog*, 127) ('una nuova immagine del mondo che desse un senso a questo nostro grigiore e valesse tutta la bellezza che si perdeva, salvandola. . . . —Una nuova faccia del mondo' (p. 70)). At the end, he finds such an image in the old-fashioned washing done in the stream, the sheets spread to dry in the sun, the stream taking away the dirt the way the ocean cleanses the shells at the end of *The Argentine Ant*. Somehow the protagonist, or possibly Calvino, hopes that the imagination can save us, can find images still worth contemplating, can manu-

facture mental pleasures that will balance the less salubrious processes of heavy industry. In most respects, this is a very negative story. In the tentative suggestion that the imagination may have the power to help us find meaning, Calvino is more expressing a hope than asserting a doctrine, but his later work will develop this theme. *Mr. Palomar* for instance entirely concerns itself with such individual imaginative acts.

In so far as there is a progression from struggle with nature or material reality (ants) to struggle with both the material and the cultural (literal grime and the corruption of power systems), one might see *A Plunge into Real Estate* as a third step, where nature has almost dropped from the picture, and what remains is struggle with the corruption of old values. The turn toward nature at sunset in the final paragraph of this third work makes us wonder for a moment whether Calvino still sees a moment of stillness and tranquillity for the enraged and cheated Quinto and Ampelio, but what Calvino describes is the sun sinking behind the unfinished block of flats. Calling attention to what the rays light up makes us realize that the new building is cutting off light, that the men are sitting in a room much darker than would have been the case at that time of day, and they have brought this darkness upon themselves.

We saw in Chapter 2 that for Calvino, a continuum exists between mind and matter, between culture and matter; a utopia must be particulate because matter is too. In these three stories, we find that continuum developed between nature or material existence and what might be called culture, or The System (to use 1960s terminology in anticipatory fashion). In terms of original Italian publication dates, *A Plunge into Real Estate* comes in 1957, between *The Argentine Ant* (1952) and *Smog* (1958). I am not arguing that Calvino thought of these as a group, or consciously explored the gamut between all-nature and all-culture. He simply set himself similar problems in all three—the story of endless and hopeless struggle—and tried it in differing contexts. The lightening of spirits that comes at the end of *The Argentine Ant* seems purest; the uplift at the end of *Smog*, where nature must recompense us for the burdens of culture as well, is somewhat weaker, and the gleam of light at the end of *A Plunge into Real Estate* is the least reassuring.³ Not surprisingly, nature and matter emerge as less problematic than society to a writer raised in a city. Whether Calvino is falling into the trap of pastoral nostalgia is debatable, but I incline to think not.⁴

³ The harmonies between man and nature in these endings are treated as more substantial by Vito Amoroso, who goes so far as to argue that in the early works, the constant core is this possibility of rapport between man and nature. Adler (1979) focuses on a tension between protagonist and environment.

⁴ Naturally some critics consider the pastoral and Rousseauvian strain a form of nostalgia and escapist weakness. Petroni looks at the arcadian strain in all Calvino's early literature. Falaschi (1971) calls attention to Calvino's own declaration that Nature is neither good nor

Reducing Complexity with Simple Patterns: *Marcovaldo* and *The Watcher*

In two works that evolved side by side, *Marcovaldo* and *The Watcher*, Calvino set himself as a problem our need to reduce complexities by applying simplifying systems. More specifically he looks at the disparity between the simplicity of any meaning system and its necessary inadequacy to contain or tame the pluriverse. In *Marcovaldo*, he uses a simple prose style; in *The Watcher*, a highly complicated one. In the former, Marcovaldo is direct in outlook and not given to abstract thought, while Amerigo is an exemplary Calvinian Cartesian self, spinning his mental wheels all day as he oversees the voting in Cottolengo. Together, these two form an interesting diptych as they deal with the intricate systems of economic and political life in a city, and their joint lesson appears to be that we must strive to match complexity with our patterns and not just fall prey to the attractions of simplicity.

Marcovaldo exists in two versions. One is a cluster of ten stories in *I racconti* (1958); the other, a collection of twenty stories. The original stories were written between 1952 and 1956, the larger group came out in 1963.⁵ Most of the stories follow a simple formula: Marcovaldo applies a rule that would work in the country to a phenomenon of city life, and ends up hurting himself or those around him.⁶ He eats mushrooms, and his assurance persuades others to do so too: everyone is poisoned. He tries to catch a woodcock, and gets everyone in trouble with the birdlime he spreads. He hopes to cure his children by taking them for fresh air in the country, but his *locus amoenus* proves to be the grounds of a sanatorium, and his children are surrounded by the ill and infectious. He learns that bee venom can cure rheumatism, which sounds like a simple country remedy, but he applies wasps to everyone, and is himself attacked by the entire nest of wasps. Marcovaldo's love of things

ill, but impassive, ambiguous like Melville's white whale (p. 385). I would argue that Calvino undercuts such pastoral flashes at the end of these novellas with the ambiguities of what they mean in the context of the oppressions to which they are attached.

⁵ For extended analyses of the two collections and the philosophical concerns that generated them, see Maria Corti (1978b and 1978c).

⁶ Cannon defines the core pattern for Marcovaldo's adventures somewhat differently: "Each vignette follows the generic pattern of the fable as outlined by Calvino in which 'a virtuous man realizes himself in an unjust or pitiless society.' But unlike the hero of the typical fable who overcomes the obstacles in his path Marcovaldo is doomed to failure" (1978: 87). Bassanese sums up critical attempts to assess Marcovaldo: "Time and again his escapades fail to produce lasting results, but Marcovaldo perseveres nonetheless. This intrinsic optimism and the ensuing failures have led critics to compare him to other literary stereotypes. For Pescio Bottino, Marcovaldo is a "stilizzato donchisciotte della felicità naturale", while Olken views him as the typical country bumpkin and Bonura defines him as a "uomo-bambino." Calvino himself, acting as his own best critic, categorized his creation

pastoral tempts his oldest son to run away with the cows on their seasonal migration to the high pastures; his resentful tale of brutally hard labour makes city life sound easy by comparison, and far from valuing his family the more, the boy rejects any notion of sharing what little money he has made. Among the stories added later, we find the same pattern. Marcovaldo goes fishing to secure foods not exposed to the poisons of the commercial system: his fish come from a polluted river and must be thrown back. In sum, the old ways will no longer serve, and the son's experience suggests that even the country may not be simple any more. Bassanese puts it well when she says, 'Marcovaldo is an immigrant in search of a distant homeland he has never really known, yet destined to live permanently in the City from which he cannot escape. Nature is his myth, but it is unreal and unobtainable in a pristine state.' (1978: 100)

Two stories move beyond country and city to test simple solutions in the context of rich and poor. In 'The lunch-box', Marcovaldo thinks his lunch of left-over sausage and turnip mash is the worst possible—because it is left over, because he has it several days in a row, because thinking of his wife makes the meal bad even when she is not present, because he hates turnips. He finds, however, that it greatly appeals to a little rich boy, who has been locked up because he refused to eat his fried brains. They exchange meals through the open window to their mutual satisfaction, but this simple solution is not allowed to bring harmony. A governess accuses Marcovaldo of stealing the china plate and silver fork, and throws his lunch-box out the window, damaging it so its lid does not close properly.

In 'Santa's Children', Marcovaldo's children decide that an extremely rich little boy is poor because he is sad and bored by the three hundred and twelve corporation presents that have piled up so far. They give him simple gifts—a hammer, a slingshot, and matches—and with these he gleefully destroys the gifts, smashes tree ornaments, and burns down the house. Ironically, Calvino has the lad's father conclude that destructive gifts give pleasure and help keep money circulating in the consumerist economy. The idea that the saddest child must be the poorest has some attractions, and certainly that child's glee with the destructive presents is straightforward; none the less this application of a simple solution to complex questions does not produce an answer that would be generally acceptable.

The later stories, as Corti (1978*b*) points out, frequently add an element of fantasy. When Marcovaldo struggles with snow (a version of physical struggle with matter), he shapes a car from a snow pile, and someone is fooled into trying to open it; he himself becomes a snowman

as the last incarnation of a long series of "candidi eroi poveri-diavoli", in the mold of Charlie Chaplin, with tinges of the "uomo di Natura" and the noble savage à la Rousseau.' (1978: 97–8)

when snow from a roof cascades down upon him; when he sneezes, the sneeze causes a tornado that strips away all the snow, returning the scene to its everyday ugliness and hostile bareness. The first event is barely possible, if highly improbable; becoming a snowman and the sneeze-tornado are pure fantasy. Marcovaldo's sand cure ends with his being flung from a barge of sand as it goes over a waterfall. Tossed as if by a catapult, he sails toward the massed humanity swimming at the river beach, and so tightly are they packed there that he feels sure he will come down on people and make his way to land without touching water—a point of satisfaction, since water would undo the good of the sand cure. Sneezing away snow and walking dryshod over the water are fantasy solutions—elegantly simple—but the underlying problems have no solutions in real life.⁷

Much of the fantasy in any of these stories amounts to a multiplication or mushrooming of small, manageable units to multitudes, and it involves Marcovaldo's sinking into such paste or flux. The wasps burgeon from one to many; so do men dressed as Santa Claus. Detergent coupons and free samples multiply until dangerously numerous. An office plant grows in a few days into a leafy jungle of a tree. Variants on paste are the fog in which Marcovaldo wanders, the smoke into which soap bubbles eventually disappear, the myriad products ridiculed in the stories about the supermarket and about destructive gifts.

The best known of all these narratives is 'Moon and Gnac'. As in the cosmicomical stories, Calvino seems spurred to extra brilliance by the moon, possibly because the lunar tradition is so strong in Italian poetry. He once thought to devote one of the Norton lectures to the moon.⁸ Marcovaldo tries to teach his children about the stars and moon, but they cannot distinguish between the lights in the firmament and those of Spaak Cognac, whose neon sign is quite the brightest aerial light around; one of the children, indeed, wonders what company put the moon up in the sky. When the children break the neon sign with stones, the inhabitants of the tenement are temporarily relieved of the twenty second on-and-off cycle of glare, and grow familiar with the sky again. Breaking the sign helps bring the Spaak company to bankruptcy, however, and soon their sign is replaced by one twice as big advertising Tomawak Cognac. The latter operates on a two-second cycle, casts an infernal red glare, and even obliterates the slender romantic possibilities previously available. A local youth had sighed and gestured up toward Isolina, the oldest girl, seeing hers as a lunar face sometimes visible through the open G of GNAC. The new sign obliterates her with an angry red W. The

⁷ Such logical dead-ends prompt Franco Ricci (1984, 1986) to see Calvino's outlook as very negative. He speaks of the ennui that permeates the 'racconti', and sees man's attempts to establish meaningful relations with the world as futile.

⁸ See *Six Memos*, 24–5; *Lezioni americane*, 26–7.

stunted romance of a girl associated with the moon, the waxing and waning of a C in the neon sign: these at first seemed extremes of city poverty. Replace them with the infernal colour and increased tempo of the later sign, and add the machinations of industrial infighting and you find Marcovaldo sinking helplessly into a flux that obliterates stargazing, a system of meaning particularly associated with primitive pastoral societies.⁹

The other half of this diptych, *The Watcher*, is signed as dating from 1953 to 1963 in the original, and appeared in 1963. The elections of 1953 are Calvino's subject, the setting being the polling place set up in the great Cottolengo institution for the feeble-minded and the deformed. Close to the beginning of this extraordinary meditation, we are given a précis of the problem: 'At times the world's complexity seemed to Amerigo a superimposition of clearly distinct strata, like the leaves of an artichoke; at other times, it seemed a clump of meanings, a gluey dough' (p. 7) ('Ad Amerigo la complessità delle cose alle volte pareva un sovrapporsi di strati nettamente separabili, come le foglie d'un carciofo, alle volte invece un agglutinamento di significati, una pasta collosa' (*La giornata d'uno scrutatore*, 13–14)).

What Calvino traces here is the way that every system for measuring Amerigo's situation proves inadequate to the complexities. In a sentence that lasts for nearly two pages, Calvino takes the notion of Amerigo calling himself a communist, and turns this into levels of meaning relating to eighteenth-century rationalism, bourgeois values, pessimism and optimism. When faced by the bare, rather repulsive room, Amerigo tries to find more hopeful symbolism in it—a true democracy. However, the room breeds none of the excited participation and meaningfulness that he had experienced just after the war, and he muses on the routinization of that charisma and on the reconstitution of a state consisting of the managers and the managed. The meaning of democracy is put in question by the Cottolengo voters, many obviously retarded or unable to make any sort of political decision independently. The very word democracy means something different to the communists and to the religious authorities, for whom it means the enfranchisement of every human being: man as the subject of history versus Adam's seed. Even 'human being' as a category comes under fire when Amerigo sees some of the deformities and freaks of nature, one of which strikes him as a 'boy-plant-fish'.¹⁰ Political distinctions based on party; words like sanity and madness, human and monster; Amerigo's assumptions about what is humane or not, responsible or not, rational

⁹ Woodhouse (1970) analyses the surreal elements in this story of an 'alienated city-dweller'. Franco Zangrilli stresses the humour of the stories.

¹⁰ For recognition of Calvino's unusually positive treatment of the grotesque in *The Watcher*, see Usher.

or not—all these undergo a scrutiny that pulverizes their powers to structure experience.

Calvino even tries to show the complexity of Amerigo's thinking that the 'legge truffa' or swindle law would be voted in when, in fact, it was defeated:

'We'll start thinking about it, all right . . .' Amerigo grumbled, already foreseeing (though he was mistaken) that the day he was living through would be remembered among the dates of an Italian reaction (instead, the famous 'swindle law' didn't pass, Italy went on, expressing more and more clearly its two-headed nature), the date of a world-wide petrification (but throughout the world the things that seem most stony really move), pacifying only lazy consciences like the chairman of these polls, and stifling the aroused consciences' need to seek further (instead, everything proved more and more complex, and it was increasingly difficult to distinguish the positive and the negative thing, and increasingly necessary to discard appearances and look for the essences that weren't makeshift: few and still uncertain . . .). (pp. 70–1)

Si comincerà a pensarci allora, invece . . .—borbottò Amerigo, già nella previsione (ma si sbagliava) che la giornata che stavano vivendo sarebbe stata ricordata tra le date d'un'involuzione italiana (invece la famosa 'legge-truffa' non passò, l'Italia andò avanti esprimendo sempre più la sua anima bifronte), d'un impietramento mondiale (ma in tutto il mondo le cose che più parevano di pietra si muovevano), dando pace solo alle coscienze pigre come quel presidente di seggio, e soffocando il bisogno di cercare delle coscienze sveglie (invece ogni cosa si mostrò sempre più complessa, e fu sempre più difficile distinguere il positivo e il negativo all'interno d'ogni cosa positiva e negativa, e più necessario scartare le apparenze e cercare le essenze non provvisorie: poche e ancora incerte . . .). (p. 93)

The very difficulty of matching concepts to reality projects itself in the elegantly tortured prose.

The novel ends on an unexpectedly positive note: Amerigo affirms the existence of a 'fuoco segreto' or secret fire—the spirit that animated the early days of democracy in Italy, the burning desire that results in founding cities or great institutions like Cottolengo. The fire quickly dies, suffocated by institutionalism, but it can exist. He also affirms a sense of calm, of belonging, in which the city of the rejected somehow integrates with the rest of society, and inmates go about daily tasks as part of a larger harmony. So affecting is this moment that Umberto Eco (1986) can call this a 'grandly religious' text. The city of ultimate imperfection finds enfolded within itself The City—the capital letter making the city into the Eternal City, the City of Man or other such symbolic abstractions for life in the human network. Such cities within cities will absorb Calvino's attention later in *Invisible Cities*.

In *Marcovaldo*, Calvino decided that the country and its old ways offered no real answer to the problems of the labyrinth. In *The Watcher*, he accepts the cityscape, probes our systems for managing it, and finds

their inadequacies. Politics has not provided a good map for the labyrinth, and neither have philosophy, history, religion, or love. Amerigo rejects the commonsense admonition not to question too deeply but just settle down and have children and take part, willy-nilly, in the cultural norms. Where *Marcovaldo* offers no help except fantasy, our poll-watcher does make several affirmations. The real existence, however fugitive, of the secret fire of idealism is one. Another is the importance of refusing to give in to standard social expectations and merge with the totality. A third is Amerigo's ability to recognize the pernicious effect of our systems of classifying experience. Each time he sees through the deceits and shortcomings of a political philosophy, or religious dogma, or basic binary opposition (such as man and monster), he reduces the barriers between himself and the rest of the world, and makes it more difficult to reject people and things and beliefs and actions on the grounds that he and they share no common ground. He may not know how to build a better world, but he painstakingly keeps the clichés from blinding him to the complexities of reality.¹¹

Calvino accepts complexity as fundamental to reality, and in this story makes a valiant effort to match that complexity with an answerable prose style and sensitive protagonist. As Calvino says years later, in an interview with Gregory Lucente (1985), 'What I'm interested in doing is to seek out—if it's the case to clarify, at any rate to represent—complexity' (p. 253). By the time the interview took place (1984), Calvino had rejected the elaborate prose with its page-long sentences in favour of limpidity and lucidity, but clearly he had focused on an issue of great importance to him in *The Watcher*, and in it created a beautiful response to the problem, if not an answer.

Both these works are early attempts at applying intellectual systems to reality. The cosmicomical stories will teach him the necessity of using many systems simultaneously to achieve a match to complexity. Only when he makes both his systems and reality abstract and symbolic, as in *Invisible Cities* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, can he enjoy the exhilaration of relatively simple matches, and even in those works, he reluctantly admits that no system is really adequate to experience or reality.

Alienated Entity, Group Identity: *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* and *The Nonexistent Knight*

The Path to the Nest of Spiders (1947) and *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959) both explore our desire to belong to a group and make life meaningful through group identity. We want to escape alienation through friend-

¹¹ Amerigo's inability to make more positive assertions about society bothers readers like De Tommaso, who are rendered uncomfortable by this intellectual rejection of the communist programme. Sobrero also sees this work as charting the rejection of the Communist Party.

ship. We want to believe that group enterprise can make our actions luminous with significance. In both novels, Calvino balances the craving for membership with fear of being overwhelmed. One's own particle-self might dissolve into the group-paste and be lost forever. Hence the tension particular to these books: humanity's need for meaning (identified here with group relationships) is tested and threatened by the Calvinian metaphysics of particles and flux.¹²

Pin, a foul-mouthed street urchin deprived of parents and love, yearns to belong to a group, any group.¹³ Even though Pin desires comrades his own age, he also despises them for their ignorance of the adult world, and makes it impossible for them to play as equals because he always shows off his awareness of adult matters—sex and violence. He longs for acceptance among the loungers at the local tavern, but discovers that they see him as an idle entertainment, not a friend to be confided in when they are forming a Partisan 'gruppo di azione patriottica'. When taken to jail as a political prisoner, he is tempted by the demand that he join the fascist Black Brigade and

go around all hung with badges and tommy-guns, terrifying people and being treated by the militia-men as one of them, linked together by the barrier of hatred separating them from other men. (p. 28)

girare tutto bardato di teschi e di caricatori da mitra, far paura alla gente e stare in mezzo agli anziani come uno dei loro, legato a loro da quella barriera d'odio che li separa dagli altri uomini. (*Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, 61)

However, he is equally attracted to the notion of being well thought of by the Partisans 'Red Wolf' and 'Cousin'.

Separating him from most of these sodalities are the adult vocabulary and adult values that he cannot understand. Adults keep changing the rules on him; they treat him as friend, then as idle amusement. They call themselves Partisans, then become members of the Black Brigade. They say they hate women, then ask for the address of his sister. They promise him to come back for him, but leave him stranded. They use mysterious words like GAP and SIM, and laugh at him when he misuses them. He does not even know where the safety-catch on his pistol is. He can see Mancino's wife and Dritto angling toward tawdry adultery, but does not

¹² Most critics have focused on other problems. *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (along with the war stories) has mostly served them as illustration for different definitions of neo-realism, as a means of challenging neo-realism through the almost mystical treatment of the landscape, and as an example of commitment compared to the fantasies of the trilogy. Most of these issues are specific to the original audience and time of original publication; they seem less pressing now. See Angelo Guglielmi, however, for a good discussion of the issues at stake, and for a few of the extended arguments, see Annoni (1968), De Mara (1971), and Falaschi (1971, 1976).

¹³ For a very persuasive account of the psychological structure of Pin and of various characters in the trilogy, see Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz. Pin's inability to work through the oedipal stage because he lacks a father-figure is well related to his other characteristics. Torrismond is similarly in search of a father.

know how to read adult responses such as Mancino's oblique gesture of strangling his hawk.

Four values in Pin's world attain special prominence because all attract even while repelling him. Smoking and wine are the first two. He finds them bitter and harsh, yet indulgence helps him feel accepted in the adult world. The other two, women and violence, he can only encompass in a small way by tormenting insects and spying on his sister. Sex and death threaten him with engulfment, with destruction of self. His mind links the rutting of Dritto and Giglia with prisoners being made to dig their own graves, and both these 'evil incomprehensible things . . . [are] as strangely fascinating to him as his own excrement' (p. 118) ('cose incomprensibili e cattive' [have for him] 'un strano fascino, come le proprie feci' (p. 164)). Only when he indulges in these activities, he thinks, will he be adult and presumably acceptable to the other adults as a friend, but sex has been made so negative for him by his prostitute sister, and violence has such obvious capacity to annihilate him, that he is in danger of being overwhelmed without gaining the friends he desires.

The closest Pin comes to a friend is Cousin, who holds his hand and in other ways makes concessions to his child status, but talks to him almost as if he were adult, and allows him the pistol that all the other adults wish to appropriate. They find their common ground in reviling women, blaming them for the war and everything filthy and nasty in life. Pin feels truly at one with Cousin in this activity, that Cousin is the 'Great Friend' Pin has longed for throughout the story. A brotherhood of hatred succeeds in Pin's life far better than one based on politics or adult sexuality.

Pin's search for meaning is appropriate to his age and condition, and his solution of sharing hatred may work for the time being, but it offers no long-term assurances. Because he tries to join so many groups before finding Cousin and his friends, we are made aware that desire to join does not guarantee that one will choose a morally defensible group. Chance led most of the Partisans in the band to become resistance fighters rather than Black Shirts, but the feeling of belonging would work just as well on the other side. We are also warned against assuming that Pin has found a viable answer by Calvino's lavishing fairy-tale motifs on the Partisan band.¹⁴ What works in a fairy-tale may not work out in 'real life'.

The Path to the Nest of Spiders looked at group meaning-structures in a relatively realistic setting. In *The Nonexistent Knight*, Calvino explores them in fantastic terms, and shows us several imaginative manifestations

¹⁴ For the best analyses of fairy-tale material, see Lucente (1986), who sees Giglia and the partisans as a parodic Snow White and dwarves; also Woodhouse (1968a), who treats the pistol as an Ariostan wand. For structuralist analyses based on Propp and other fairy-tale narratologists, see Cornelia Irmann-Ehrenzeller.

of the same dilemma: to join and risk loss of self, or hold apart and feel alienated. In this novel, the urge to become one with a larger entity, usually a social group, repeats itself for Raimbaut, Agilulf, Torrismund, Gurduloo, and Bradamante. They all seek identity yet run the danger of losing it.

Raimbaut tries to give his life meaning through various actions deemed proper for a hero. First he wants to avenge his father's death. On the same day in which he succeeds and so loses that organizing goal, he falls in love with Bradamante. Unsophisticated though he is, even he realizes that he is replacing one obsession with another as a means of ordering his life. He also tries to give his actions meaning by becoming a respected fighter. To this end, he asks Agilulf for advice, and imitates him in counting things, arranging supplies, and even burying the dead.

Agilulf himself desires to be a member of the human community, but remains ever-aware of the gulf separating him from mortals; they have bodies and he does not. He is too conscientious to be popular, and too precise and truthful to lend his countenance to their military boasting and lies. He does not sleep, does not get tired, does not eat. His armour never shows wear or tear after battle. For all his desire to be just one of the men, their carnality repels him. He can barely tolerate the stench and filth attaching to their bodies. His claim to being a knight and therefore part of their system rests on his having rescued a virgin. When her virginity is challenged, his entire effort at self-creation falters, partly because he would lose his knighthood and all recognition, partly because he rejects the carnality being attributed to one whom he took to be free of it.

Early on, we are shown the major threat to his way of life, the possibility that he might dissolve into the paste of existence. Particularly in the ambiguities of twilight, he desperately counts and piles and arranges objects to fend off engulfment:

But if the world around was instead melting into the vague and ambiguous, he would feel himself drowning in that morbid half light, incapable of allowing any clear thought or decision to flower in that void. In such moments he felt sick, faint; sometimes only at the cost of extreme effort did he feel himself able to avoid melting away completely. It was then he began to count: trees, leaves, stones, lances, pine cones, anything in front of him. Or he put them in rows and arranged them in squares and pyramids. (p. 20)

Se invece il mondo intorno sfumava nell'incerto, nell'ambiguo, anch'egli si sentiva annegare in questa morbida penombra, non riusciva più a far affiorare dal vuoto un pensiero distinto, uno scatto di decisione, un puntiglio. Stava male: erano quelli i momenti in cui si sentiva venir meno; alle volte solo a costo d'uno sforzo estremo riusciva a non dissolversi. Allora si metteva a contare: foglie, pietre, lance, pigne, qualsiasi cosa avesse davanti. O a metterle in fila, a ordinarle in quadrati o in piramidi. (*Il cavaliere inesistente*, 310)

Creating geometries keeps him from dissolving on a day-to-day basis; his force of will, 'la forza di volontà', is what brings him into existence at all and what must keep him coherent when the paste of existence presses hard upon him.

Torrismund plays a minor role, but his Parsifalesque experience with the Knights of the Grail shows us one more variant on the desire to belong to a social group as a means of defining self by gaining a 'father' and an unassailable place in society.¹⁵ He tries to suffocate his individuality in the communion of the grail. This exercise, a parody of mystic disciplines and of submission to a totalitarian system, bores Torrismund. He cannot let himself be entirely possessed by the community. When the Grail Knights sack a peasant village, his disgust makes him shift sides and lead the peasants.

Gurduloo illustrates in caricature the ability of paste to annihilate identity. He possesses no barriers between self and other, and so cheerfully loses his humanity in something else—he believes himself to be a duck, a whale, a frog, a grave, and, paradigmatically, soup. When given a cauldron of soup from which to glean the scrapings, Gurduloo rapturously repeats a fragment of his benefactor's phrase, 'tutta zuppa', three times. This 'all soup' soon becomes 'Tutto è zuppa!' (p. 333) or 'all is soup' or 'everything is soup' as he puts his head in the cauldron, then climbs in, and starts moving, tortoise-like, with the cauldron over him. He is smeared with soup from top to toe, his eyes full of it. This grotesque melting makes Raimbaut dizzy, even as Gurduloo's previous soup fantasia provoked in Agilulf 'una specie di vertigine'—a kind of vertigo. Vertigo at the edge of a vortex: soup is a primordial flux, and Calvino will indeed use 'zuppa' and 'colla' (glue) to describe the roiling flux of proto-neutrinos in 'Il niente e il poco'.

Raimbaut responds explicitly to the threat embodied in Gurduloo: Raimbaut feared 'the world being nothing but a vast shapeless mass of soup in which all things dissolved and tinged all else with itself. "Help! I don't want to become soup" ' (p. 54) ('il mondo non fosse altro che un'immensa minestra senza forma in cui tutto si sfaceva e tingeva di sé ogni altra cosa. "Non voglio diventar minestra: aiuto!" ' (p. 334)). Here we see a pre-cosmicomical form of Calvino's metaphysic; Qfwfq will make this paste, glue, or soup into a basic substance of the universe. In this earlier novel, such materials take an interpretively less open and more purely physical and human form.

¹⁵ Sanguinetti Katz notes the importance of the Search for the Father in other Calvino works, notably *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, and the incompletely resolved oedipal tensions in other works like *The Cloven Viscount* and *The Baron in the Trees*. For analyses of the effects of the absent father applied to other authors but applicable to Calvino, see *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text*, ed. by Robert Con Davis (Amherst, Mass., 1981).

And then there is Bradamante. Her belonging to groups is thwarted by her nature; a woman among male warriors; a warrior among nuns. Alienated she undoubtedly feels. She longs for this man or that, but once a man loves her, she will have none of him. As a writer, she bemoans the disparity between marks on paper and the objects of the world, the landscapes and experiences, the physicality, that somehow escape her pen. We do not witness as much of her anguish to belong as we do for the rest, but we deduce it from her activities: her dissatisfactions as a nun are a tension underlying the narrative, and indeed its source.¹⁶

When we examine how all of these characters end, we see some interesting comments on this desire to belong. Agilulf, deprived of his originary virgin, loses his will to exist, and disintegrates, considerably leaving his armour to Raimbaut. Like a virgin, Agilulf has maintained a distance between himself and experience; his armour is never smirched, and his night with the notorious Lady Priscilla is a hilarious send-up of the Arthurian seduced-knight sequences. Messing with the untidy carnal realities that joining humanity would necessitate proves ultimately more than Agilulf can bear. Let down (he thinks) by his virgin, an appropriate symbol for his own isolation, he disappears into that other symbol of himself, the *mise en abyme* at the centre of his shield.¹⁷

Raimbaut, in contrast, finds his place by accepting and glorying in the carnal and physical realities. He inherits the armour, and after a day of his battling, its dents and dirt proclaim it to be his and not his benefactor's. He also makes love to Bradamante, admittedly under false pretenses, and continues to pursue her. Since she appears to be yielding to his advances at the end, perhaps he will satisfy that desire for joining as well. She too may now accept someone who loves her, and if so, may not return to the nunnery.

Torrismund faces a different kind of joining; having been granted title of Count of Curvaldia, he discovers that his subjects, the peasants whom he had helped against the Grail Knights, reject his claim to possess them. They have become a self-sufficient, self-governing group and see no need for a hereditary ruler. They offer equality and citizenship, and the bemused Torrismund accepts. He wonders how and why he should be held equal to his squire, Gurduloo, a man who does not know whether he

¹⁶ Her discussions of writing and its discontents provide the foundation for much critical discourse on Calvino's metafictional concerns. For those most closely concerned with Bradamante, see Cannon (1980) and Schneider (1981).

¹⁷ *Mise en abyme* is originally a heraldic term meaning that a shield is replicated in miniature and placed in the centre of the original shield. Heraldically, this involves only two levels of magnitude, but of course if the small shield were a perfect copy, it would have to have a small shield within it and so on in infinite regress. Hence the two meanings—single and infinite replication—that turn up in contemporary critical parlance. Susanne Eversmann recognizes this literal *mise en abyme* in her analysis of *The Nonexistent Knight* (1979: 113).

exists or not. To this, the citizens answer, that they too had not known that they existed, so even Gurduloo may learn.

In *The Nonexistent Knight*, Agilulf's fear of the paste of existence seems only partly to be fear of women; being nothing, he can melt into anything, and women are only one conspicuous form of engulfing force. Likewise Pin holds back, and in his case the femininity of the Other is blisteringly apparent. We will see further variants on this in *The Cloven Viscount* and *The Baron in the Trees*, but by *Cosmicomics*, the feminization of the Other will become more subtle. To understand Calvino's development, we can usefully note these early instances of raw fear. His images will at least become more sophisticated as time goes on, and the fear will erupt again only in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*.

The other elements which most closely point to the later concerns are Agilulf's passion for geometrization, and Red Wolf's tale of killing Pelle, with the surreal multiplication of raincoated pursuers. Qfwfq too will occasionally plunge into love of the geometric, as in 'Crystals' and 'I meteoritì'. That same impulse, however, will haunt *Invisible Cities* and *Mr. Palomar*. The multiplication of murderers clearly foreshadows the negative proliferations in 'The Chase', 'Games Without End', and 'A Sign in Space', where multiplication of threatening units turns into a 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' nightmare sequence.

Even for an action as simple and literal as joining a group, Calvino's metaphysic causes him to project images of psychic distress, symbolic renderings of self being dissolved into paste. He shows many groups in this novel: army, ancestry, knighthood, a democratic village, religious societies such as Grail Knights and nuns. None of his characters, with the possible exception of Torrismund accepting democracy, enters the fellowship and feels psychically rewarded and likely to remain so. Indeed, in both this novel and *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, we note the extreme difficulty that Calvino protagonists have in achieving happiness. Bradamante and Raimbaut may succeed, but we will never know. Torrismund likewise may find life as a citizen worth pursuing, but we have no evidence. Agilulf is destroyed. Pin may be headed towards a life of paranoid misogyny. Only in *The Cloven Viscount* and *The Baron in the Trees* do we find exceptions to this psychic distress, two characters who come close to happiness. Let us observe now what makes them different.

Divided and Separated Selves:

The Cloven Viscount and *The Baron in the Trees*

Happy endings in Calvino's fiction are sufficiently rare that their appearance in two early novels makes these two worth pondering. Calvino does seem to find answers to the problem of meaning and

wholeness here—but why did the answers not extend beyond these fictions? If these are viable paths, why not follow them? One message of *The Cloven Viscount* (1952) is 'Be normal'. Once Medardo's halves are reunited, he accepts his station in life, marries, has lots of children, and is declared happy—a solution Calvino will reject in *The Watcher*. In *The Baron in the Trees* (1957), the protagonist feels separate from society but accepts his difference, cultivates it, learns to mesh comfortably with other people, and maintains his eccentricity right up to a death that follows upon a rich and varied life. Cosimo is never as smugly happy as Medardo, but his faultless achievement of self-definition gives him grounds for pride, and his sprightliness counters alienated melancholy and gives his life a lightness of the sort Calvino hymns in the Norton lectures. However, these answers do not seem to satisfy Calvino in the long run, since he does not repeat them. Why do these answers work here but not elsewhere?

Medardo's story puts the search for meaning in terms of the divided self, the person who feels incomplete and longs for wholeness. Calvino talks about this element in the story in his 1960 preface to *Our Ancestors*:

Divided, mutilated, incomplete, enemy to himself—contemporary man is all of these; Marx called it 'alienated', Freud, 'repressed'; a state of ancient harmony has been lost, and he aspires to a new kind of completeness. This was the ideological-moral kernel I consciously wished to give to the story.¹⁸

Dimidiato, mutilato, incompleto, nemico a se stesso è l'uomo contemporaneo; Marx lo disse 'alienato', Freud 'represso'; uno stato d'antica armonia è perduto, a una nuova completezza s'aspira. Il nocciolo ideologico-morale che volevo conscientemente dare alla storia era questo. (*I nostri antenati*, 402) [The English translation above is my own; the volume entitled *Our Ancestors* does not include this 1960 preface.]

As will become his custom, Calvino explores this generative notion—division—from several angles, embodying the problem in more than one character. Medardo is literally split in half; his nephew suffers the alienation brought on by youth and by lack of position in the society. Dr Trelawney is an exile in addition to being a man who cannot reconcile theory with practice; although a doctor, he suffers from revulsion at the unsavoury physical details of human existence. The Huguenots are cut off from their original source of inspiration, and stumble blindly after a religion they no longer understand, and as they do so, they violate basic Christian charity. The lepers are cast off from society, and must make

¹⁸ This ideological kernel is secondary to the original impulse, the simple image of a man divided in two. Milanini (1987, 1990) notes that the generative images are concretized clichés—'comportarsi come un mezzo uomo', 'starsene sospesi', and 'essere vuoti dentro'. Carlton gives us more such metaphors made real, and notes that *The Baron in the Trees* is an elaboration of 'sali in cielo'.

sense of the life permitted them by disease. Even Pietrochiodo is riven by his love of engineering and his knowledge that he creates instruments of torture. All suffer from forms of division and alienation.

Although not as open to multiple interpretations as the mythographic fables, these fantastic stories do invite more than one reading. In *The Cloven Viscount*, the first to present itself (beyond Calvino's own statement on contemporary man) is a phantasmic political dimension. Medardo was a hopeful, naïve youth before the war, but comes back deeply split, part of him repulsively idealistic and ineffectual; the other part devoted to selfish and destructive actions, characterized by frenzied outbursts in which he executes his own followers. One does not have to dig too far to see parallels between leftist activities of the Resistance, and the post-war world in which ideals make little headway against the less than ideal actions and frequent purges of party members. If these phantasmic politics have any substance, then what does Medardo's happy ending signify? Is it a despairing throwaway? A naïve wish? Does Medardo, as a viscount, represent a return to the older social pattern of feudal lord and dependants, and is this older pattern being shown to have virtues? *The Baron in the Trees* presents us with similarly problematic political dimensions; the French Revolution is the equivalent to the emergence of the political left, and Cosimo's residual loyalties after the development of the Empire seem related to loyalties one could feel to the post-war left even when it had developed in ways one disapproved of. Hence, we need in due course to consider the possible meanings of Calvino's use of aristocratic protagonists.

The more obvious reading concerns division of self on a personal level. Half of Medardo comes back from the war. This bad half breaks his father's heart through an act of cruelty. That half ravages the countryside, hanging law-breakers, burning hayricks, offering a child poisoned mushrooms and the like. The division crazily impels Medardo to divide everything he sees. He claims that his divided vision is richer than that which he enjoyed when whole, so his acts of cruelty are actually kindnesses. The many animals and vegetables cloven by his sword would appear to contradict this claim, as does hanging minor criminals; such victims gain no enriched vision.

Medardo's internal division also sets him at odds with women, as we see in his treatment of Sebastiana and Pamela. Sebastiana had nursed the Terralba offspring, bedded the older males, and prepared all their corpses for the grave. She treats Medardo like a boy to be scolded into better behaviour, and her smothering bossiness is understandably something he tries to escape, although in doing so, he rejects the one person who treats him as an ordinary human being. He escapes her by falsely declaring her to have leprosy and sending her to the leper village. Mother, mate, and crone, she is intolerable to someone who feels himself but half a man.

That phrase, of course, is suggestive. All the battle images of gutted horses and fingers cut off, all the slashing and cutting in the story, do suggest castration anxieties.¹⁹

Pamela is linked to the realm of the horizontal, the inchoate, the pre-linguistic, and the sexual, as Frasson-Marín (1986) points out. The herd-girl invites Medardo to possess her body by the sea or in the woods—both standard symbols of the unconscious, inchoate, unbounded, and feminine—but he cannot bring himself to touch her, and tries instead to take her to his castle where she would be mistress of a (phallic) tower. Evidently his masculinity is only operative where he feels safe (and where she might very well be imprisoned). In her practical way, she is unwilling to put herself in the hands of someone whose sexual ability and good intentions she doubts.

In most of the sub-plots, the divisions do not reach happy conclusions. The lepers lose the hedonistic pleasures they had cherished when the good half of Medardo shames them into more conventional behaviour. The division within the Huguenots expresses itself in their lack of charity, and in Esau, a thief, cheat, non-respecter of parents, and breaker of every rule. He is a boy determined to commit every sin he hears of, including those that adults think he cannot yet understand. His actual sins to date seem little more than those of the fruit thieves in *The Baron in the Trees*, but in this younger generation and in their joyless rigidity, the Huguenots do not appear to be heading for happiness.

Dr Trelawney, cheerfully borrowed from Robert Louis Stevenson, is also denied a conventional happy ending. After making slight concessions to his obligations as a doctor, he sees a British ship: 'The gunwales and rigging were full of sailors carrying pineapples and tortoises and waving scrolls with maxims on them in Latin and English' (p. 246) ('Ai parapetti delle murate e sulle alberature c'era pieno di marinai che mostravano ananassi e testuggini e srotolavano cartigli su cui erano scritte delle massime latine e inglesi' (*Il visconte dimezzato*, 76–7)). Captain Cook sights the Doctor through his telescope and invites him on board to resume their card game. The Doctor thus disappears into something like an old map (maxim-emblazoned scrolls, exotic new-world discoveries). This departure smacks of stepping back into a picture frame; it is not a happy ending so much as suspended animation.

And finally, we have the unnamed narrator, Medardo's nephew. His separation is social to start with, because he is the product of a misalliance. He also suffers the discontent of youth. He laments being abandoned by Dr Trelawney, stuck in a world full of responsibilities and will-o'-the-wisps. But he has no responsibilities. He has no function in a world where function is mostly hereditary. This feudal world that gives

¹⁹ See Sanguinetti Katz for detailed analysis of the Freudian paradigms underlying the story; see also Marilyn Migiel's discussion of omnipotence fantasies in the trilogy.

Medardo his means of uniting himself to society is less forgiving or helpful towards the products of misalliances. For lack of better object, the boy seems all too likely to waste his life on will-o'-the-wisps.

So how do we read the solution proposed for Medardo? It is conventional in terms of family, in terms of finding meaning through begetting children, and in terms of living in the post to which one is born. The narrator, however, who by virtue of his function is important to readers, cannot benefit from such a solution. Nor can Dr Trelawney, the lepers, or the Huguenots. Only Pamela may be said to benefit, for like her English namesake, this humble girl marries the local lord. This answer, in other words, is singularly unhelpful for most characters in the novel. Had Pamela married a local swain, she would have lived in poverty, and her many children would sometimes have gone hungry, and possibly been hanged for smuggling by Medardo or his successor. Wealth plays its role in this happiness, and too many of the possible happy endings in this story are prevented by lack of such wealth for Medardo's solution to pose as a panacea.

Calvino's light tone and conventional ending should not blind us to subversive elements in this story. Far from simply accepting the fairy-tale ending, Calvino seems to be deconstructing it.²⁰ He gives us the romance, with the traditional titled character, and then makes us feel the limitations of the romance conventions. In so far as there is any political commentary, that too points to problems rather than offering real solutions. The last word of the story, will-o'-the-wisps, is disturbing for its suggestion that life may mostly consist of those insubstantial fires rather than of any secret fire like that invoked in *The Watcher*. The story is at some levels less cheerful than its surface, and the variously expressed fears of the feminine, of life's carnal crudities, and of castration all suggest that 'Marry! Have children! Be normal!' is a futilely simple-minded answer to the complexities of human experience.

The Baron in the Trees grows out of an act of will: 'I told you I don't want any, and I don't!' Refusing to eat the molluscs, Cosimo mounts the tree, and declares that he will never come down, and indeed he does not. With these expressions, he launches himself into a life of difference. He accepts that he is different from others, and his time is spent exploring the degree to which and the ways in which he can mesh with society without violating his sense of self. Like the non-existent knight, he comes into being by such an act of will, but Agilulf is humourless and serious, and is destroyed when he believes his originary virgin to be discredited. Cosimo values his mode of life because of its ability to make him different in Violante's eyes, but when she belittles it, he does not lose his sense of self, and he will lose that love rather than destroy the self he has created. By and large, he is happy, though he does not always realize this

²⁰ Sanguinetti Katz also sees negative elements in this apparently happy ending.

at the time. Since his method for achieving happiness seems less beset by doubts and self-denigration than any others Calvino explores, we must wonder why this answer does not suffice.

Cosimo gives intensity to his actions by accepting a limitation, much as a poet accepts the limitations of the sonnet form, in the hopes of more depth and expressivity. Cosimo will never descend from the trees—but he lives in a land covered by all sorts of trees, so the limit does not force him to stylite extremes. He can go to the centre of town, to neighbouring towns, to the vineyards, to family estates, and through the forests to the sea-shore. He talks to all levels of society, reads the current books, corresponds with thinkers throughout Europe, and can even join such groups as the Masons. His involvement with his society may be marginal, but we realize that it might not have been as strong and varied had he led the life of the narrator, Biagio, Cosimo's brother.

Withdrawing from society puts him in the position of having somehow to justify his life. What does he do for his fellow creatures? In an adventure heavily influenced by *Treasure Island* Cosimo leads various sectors of society in a raid against marauding Turks. He organizes fire-watch during a dry season, and learns the pleasures of command, and enjoys his own ability to lead men. He supports the half-hearted local stirrings of revolution. He becomes famous throughout Europe, and is visited by Napoleon. He leads and attacks troops moving in his forest. He cheerfully helps neighbours—taking messages, pruning trees and vines, explaining European news. In short, he does as much or more than most people for their society, but he does not subordinate himself to a political machine and he does not lose himself in some cause or movement. His first impulses are to live for himself, and then to deal with others.

His greatest joys and woes concern women. As in *The Cloven Viscount*, we see some sort of resistance to women, except as purveyors of sexual pleasure. No wife or normal living arrangements will be possible for him, and his escapades with village women are treated as the caterwauling of a tomcat—strictly affairs of willing flesh, but personally insignificant. The three women who matter to him are his mother, the Generalessa; his sister, Battista; and Viola or Violante, daughter of the neighbouring house. All three are extremely self-willed, as stubborn, perhaps, in their ways as he is in his, and all exhibit something like his grotesquerie in self-expression.

Whereas Cosimo creates his life around trees, his mother had made hers out of military concerns. She thinks in terms of armies, supplies, marches, signals, and bandages, and Biagio notes that she would have viewed her sons under fire with equanimity, but worries about their breaking bones when just playing as boys do. She learns about playfulness from her son, even as he learned leadership and something about shaping an eccentric life from her. Had he stayed in the house, he

might have found pressure to join the military oppressive; having won his freedom early, and kept his distance, he can afford to love her at her end.

Battista is another matter entirely. Cosimo hates her throughout. Her culinary grotesqueries seem the more revolting because they involve so many acts of severing: a platter full of the heads of snails, for instance, or a pig's tongue cut out, a lobster substituted, and the tongue in its claws as if it had torn the tongue out. Later in life she returns from Paris with a model guillotine, and beheads lizards and mice at the table. Her desire to amputate appendages and force her will on those around her is what drives Cosimo off in the first place. Migieli's analyses of these food images suggests that there is a fairly clear link between these oral fantasies and the less literal ones of being overwhelmed and engulfed that inform Calvino's other works. Battista embodies the impulses of the bad half of Medardo with the female bossiness of Sebastiana, and Cosimo takes extreme measures to escape.

Violante, his love, is just as self-willed, and eventually she cuts herself off from him with the same determination that he takes to the trees, for what seems like momentary whim. She values him for being different, yet cannot forbear trying to make him give up all for her sake. She measures herself by men's total capitulation. She forces Cosimo into new longings and desires, new jealousies and emotions, new frustrations and gratitudes, and perhaps by such perpetual novelty makes herself the only woman he truly loves yet can never possess. With her, he suffers agonies, yet in retrospect sees himself as having been happy.

Cosimo achieves a form of happiness not as passive bliss, or mere contentment, but as constant battle, constant alertness, constant mental engagement with whatever he must do. Qfwfq will exhibit some of this same engagement, but Qfwfq lacks the trees; he faces no limits, and hence lacks anything by which to measure himself. Ultimately none of his desires can be fulfilled, whereas many of Cosimo's are achieved. However, ultimate meaning escapes Cosimo as it does Qfwfq. Indeed, the baron cannot even fully define what he has done and why; as he says to Tolstoy's Prince Andrej, he has lived for ideals which he does not know how to explain to himself. Definable, defensible meaning thus trickles away, leaving one with pattern for its own sake. Cosimo defines himself by an act of will. Is it entirely chance that molluscs trigger his action, or that he heralds the revolution by blowing on a 'conchiglia' or conch shell? In Qfwfq's world, those will figure strongly in two of Qfwfq's attempts to separate himself from his surroundings.

In addition to the political and psychological interpretations, Calvino also gives us a comment on the protagonist as artist. Cosimo's withdrawal from society in order to see things more clearly corresponds to some writers' and artists' distancing themselves in order to gain perspec-

tive. Nor is Cosimo the only artist. When Biagio laments the difficulties of writing about his brother, he links the branches of Cosimo's trees to the black lines on his paper. However, the characters as artists achieve no more meaning than they do in their political or psychological form. Biagio certainly finds no solace from his writing, and points out that even the limited sense of meaning and happiness achieved by Cosimo was a historical accident. With the disappearance of the trees, a Cosimo of a later generation would not have been able to lead Cosimo's life. However much Calvino himself hopes to make sense by writing, he makes no more claims for it as an answer to the problem of meaning than he makes for the other methods of organizing life.

Identifying the Labyrinth

What then did Calvino accomplish in these precosmical works? If these represent an ongoing attempt to map the maze, what is the maze and what does the map disclose? And why do I insist on treating them as 'pre-' anything, as if the real Calvino only commenced with *Cosmicomics*? How does reading them after the cosmical stories alter our understanding of these varied works?

Take the last question first. Critics who simply look at those novels and stories—indeed many of whom were looking at the early novels as they came out in the days before *Cosmicomics* existed—see the works as trying to solve very different problems from those discussed here. The issues that matter when hindsight is not possible grow, most of them, out of theories of what literature should be. Many of the preliminary studies set up a contrast between 'realtà' and 'fantasia' or 'favola'. These readers are concerned with Calvino's contributions to neo-realism and its attempt to render reality. They worry about the error of incorrect approaches to reality, such as those of the *nouveau roman*, whose authors submerged themselves in the 'things' to the exclusion of social awareness or meaning, or who mistake their own subjectivity for objectivity. Some of these readers express regret at Calvino's loss of engagement and his waste of talent on fantasy. Other readers uphold his fantastic departures from consensus reality with ingenious and urgent arguments insisting that the writings can be reconciled with engagement of a sort, that a fable as airy as *The Cloven Viscount* can be seen as relevant to the state of contemporary humanity.²¹ Yet others note the fashion in which Calvino escapes the élitist and mannered traditions of Italian high literature and produces something popular while still in touch with the Dantesque and Ariostan heritage.²²

²¹ In addition to the critics listed in n. 12, see Sabugo Abril, Patuzzi, and Caimmi-Lamoureux.

²² See Woodhouse (1989), Giovanna Finocchiaro Chimirri, and De Lauretis (1975).

When readers look for common concerns or note favourite Calvino themes, they usually point to alienation. Here I am at one with previous readers, but I see alienation as a subdivision of searching for meaning, one form that the search can take. Alienation is certainly present in all of these early works. The forms it takes, however, are relatively conventional: a protagonist feels alienated from a society, and the society is present in the fiction. Even when the society is more mythical than real, as is Charlemagne's army, human social structures and history are present. The alienation, in other words, is personal and historical, and has either direct or allegorical applicability to twentieth-century humanity. Readers more psychologically inclined see the problem in terms of wholeness, which again, I would see as a subdivision of the meaning quest.²³ They focus on specific targets and situations producing the sense of incompleteness, since psychic wholeness is not readily studied in the abstract.

Calvino evidently discovered that he did not like being enslaved by the mythologies of others; he did not like feeling closed in by pre-existing systems, just as he prefers stories that take place out of doors, as he notes in the preface to *Our Ancestors*. He did not like the overly specific details of realism. They seemed cumbersome. He protests that such realistic details do not matter: Amerigo is at first a member of a nameless leftist party in a nameless city; the specific names follow, but we are told that the labels are meaningless and misleading. In these early works, Calvino tries the normal contexts for alienation—country and city, nature and culture, politics, economics, and the like. Those ways of dividing up reality proved constraining. In his more realistic works, he finds no general answers to the problems of alienation, and the only partial answer is that moment of lightness at the end, the change of consciousness that makes the protagonist forget the problem of meaning and feel relief. Protagonist and landscape coalesce and grow transparent, light, utterly impersonal, and almost disembodied.

In the trilogy, he tries to find a more abstract way of asking his questions by means of an image—bisected man, boy in tree, empty armour—rather than by means of plot. Abstraction would help him escape the pre-existing meaning structures, but the human contexts cling to these creations and weigh them down. The fabulous settings permitted one degree of distance from everyday Italy and the twentieth century, but that was not enough. Rank and religion, and wealth and bodily filth remain. Because readers know there is a history attaching to the setting—the Enlightenment, the war with the Turks—they find the treatment of it thin. The characters may be symbolic, but they are close enough to human that readers tend to want more psychological depth,

²³ Frasson-Marin, Migiel (1986), Sanguinetti Katz, and Schneider (1981).

more roundness, more complexity of interaction with other characters. Calvino's working with novelistic materials in non-novelistic fashion is only partly successful because it only partly obliterates readers' expectations. True, these novels might also be called romances, fairy-tales, allegories, and in the case of *The Baron in the Trees*, perhaps even an anatomy or encyclopaedia or negative *Bildungsroman*.²⁴ None the less, in a novel-dominated culture, novel standards intrude and affect our readings when the works exhibit too many novelistic traits.

At some level, Calvino seems to have desired to win free from the individual, the personal, and the carnal. We see his undercutting of answers that will only do for a few individuals; we see his rejection of personality, of flesh, and of society as we know it. The early stories chart his rejections of all these as 'no exits' in the maze. But if these offer no exits, no chances for reintegration and wholeness, where does one turn?

Calvino seems to have decided to turn to science, or to the universe as science gives it to us. This offered him a way of abstracting and purifying the conflicts. It offered him story contexts without distracting and irrelevant historical detail. He had tried aristocratic protagonists as a means of abstracting and generalizing his protagonists—in fairy-tale terms, we are all princes and princesses to ourselves—but could not escape the classist presuppositions. His cosmic personage proved to be a protagonist so far removed from the human that we cease to expect human psychology, and can accept more easily the highly cerebral nature of the fabulations. It offered him a way of opening up multiple levels of meaning. Because he found humans so unedifying, he seems to have wished some sort of physical, material bedrock on which to found his quest, the universe of non-man rather than man.

Once we see how Calvino shifts from traditional forms of alienation to a more general quest for meaning, then we can see upon looking back that quest for meaning and authenticity is a common denominator in the early works. In a sense, 'quest for meaning' constitutes just another way of my discussing alienation (or wholeness), but puts that nexus of values in an abstract and cerebral realm of investigation rather than in the emotional and social and psychic spheres. I am arguing that 'quest for meaning', ways of relating the I to the not-I, is the most general statement of the problem for Calvino. In the early works, Calvino explores meaning and authenticity within human society. In the early works, the force that threatens to engulf is often overtly feminine; in later works, it becomes the more neutral paste or flux. The cosmicomical tales give him that

²⁴ Some of these generic possibilities are discussed by Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus (1978, 1988); Jonard (1984) notes the Enlightenment encyclopedic tendencies. One of the more interesting allegorical readings is that of Jill Carlton, who sees this as a recasting and rewriting of Genesis and the man who didn't fall.

material form for it as they take him into intellectual, philosophical, and scientific versions of the quest. In the later combinatorial works, we will find other realms of abstraction and new ways of symbolizing the flux.

The cosmicomical tales let us see why the early orientation failed to produce literature with quite the flair and brio and the polished Fabergé surfaces of later works. Calvino was fighting against too much inherited material that made him uncomfortable. Mazza could say of the early works that they lack words for beauty, and find all too many for ugliness. Woodhouse (1989), however, asserts that from 1963 on, the works can be described as a celebration of the 'bellezza del mondo'. Something changed when Calvino found a compatible mindscape.²⁵ He finally identified *his* labyrinth, and could then find ways to talk about it. Only when he finds his cosmic vision does he fully become Calvino, become the author who captivated a world audience.

²⁵ Calligaris argues that at this point in his development, Calvino managed to transcend his original dualism.

5

Literature as Web: *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *If on a winter's night a traveler*

I have come to the end of this apologia for the novel as a vast net.

(*Six Memos*, 124)

Sono giunto al termine di questa mia apologia del romanzo come grande rete.

(*Lezioni americane*, 120)

Web and text (L. *textus*) are much the same, something woven. As networks of lines that interlace and intersect, a text forms a grid for plotting the relationship between points, or becomes a mental spider's web bridging the chasm between fixed assumptions. Webs and texts are systems for ordering experiences. One such web-like structure is scientific discourse, subject of Calvino's scrutiny in the cosmicomic stories. Literary texts are part of the larger network we call literature. In this realm, if anywhere, we might expect a writer to find answers to his problems with meaning.

In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969, 1973) and *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979), Calvino treats literature as one kind of web—a safety net—between our acrobatics and the yawning void. Although it offers some protection against the long drop, literature by no means banishes all fears. Books are obviously important to Calvino, but he shows them providing little philosophical relief. Instead of consolation, escape, or edification in the earlier novel, we find a gush of threatening images, dark imaginings, culminating in Orphic nightmares of dismemberment and visions of chaos.¹ The later novel, though much cheerier in tone, still threatens us with danger from institutions or organizations, and violence. Those in power conspire constantly against the protagonists of the novel fragments, the Reader, and ultimately literature. The questions posed by these two novels are, therefore, arresting. If literature provides such limited assurance, why write and why read? Why does exploration of literature as system provoke in Calvino such a flood of anxieties? How

¹ For a discussion of this text as a transitional piece striving to go from closed to open structure, see Philippe Daros (1986).

do the infantile fantasies of engulfment and the disturbing images of dismemberment relate to the cerebral questions posed in the novels about how literature functions as meaning-system and whether any act of interpretation can be valid? How do these two texts relate to other Calvino novels in their attempts to cast life in terms of Calvino's metaphysic of flux, minimal units, and systems of ordering? One might also wonder to what degree these later works seem to go beyond the cosmicomical tales. What developments or changes take place in the problems that Calvino puts to himself?

For a start, let me suggest that *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* devotes itself primarily to fears, and *If on a winter's night a traveler* primarily to desires—two generative components of dream, daydream, and art according to Freud. Indeed, Freud makes a cameo appearance among the tarot arcana, a gesture to readers who would demand that some account be taken of psychoanalytic concerns in this collage of anxiety-wracked fantasies. This chapter will be more concerned than previous chapters with psychology as it relates to literature, with Freud, Lacan, and Holland, with Neumann and Jung. Dead Fathers and Great Mothers will put in their appearances or declare their absences. We shall see what they can contribute to our understanding of the symbolic structures of Calvino's imagination.

‘In writing, what speaks is what is repressed’: Tarots as Rorschach Test

When we remember the sprightliness characteristic of so much of the early fiction, the gush of dark images in this novel comes as a surprise, all the more unexpected because some of them are brought forth by the exquisite, luxurious Visconti tarots. Nor has the demonic emphasis of this fictive universe gone unnoticed.² What is it about Calvino's philosophical speculations that brings up these tormented tales?

Consider two stories, one from the ‘tavern’ and one from the ‘castle’ section as especially rich in the resonant symbols. The ‘Waverer's tale’ or ‘Storia dell'indciso’ from the ‘tavern’, based on the crude Marseilles deck, starts with the Knight of Cups, the same arcanum that starts off the first ‘castle’ tale, and as the tale unfolds, there is enough overlap to make the ‘tavern’ version sound familiar.³ Like the ‘castle’ Ingrate, the

² Critics who pay special attention to the demonic and anguished qualities include Carter; Markey (1983, 1986), who sees dissolution of conventional values as a comment upon modern man; Schneider (1980), who puts the accent upon themes of time and death; Frasson-Marin (1986), who notes that several characters who reach the centre of the forest and tell their tales have apparently already been killed; and Almansi (1973), who sees Calvino as a sorcerer's apprentice who invokes the card patterns and thereby entraps himself in their rigidities and robs himself of authorial freedom.

³ I have chosen to treat the text as a novel, but many critics prefer to stress the separateness of the sections, Schneider (1980) calling it a two-novella volume. Fusco, Jannone, and

'tavern' Waverer leaves his wedding feast—or so the narrator first guesses from the cups card. Later the narrator decides that the Waverer was fleeing having to choose between two women. Like the Grave Robber from another 'castle' story, the Waverer climbs a tree and finds a suspended city, where again choices press themselves upon him. In his frustration and fury at always having to choose and exclude—this wellspring or that, this river or that—he realizes that he wants all wells, all rivers, and hence cries out for the sea. After adventures featuring an apocalyptic beach, a crumbling tower, and the devil, and with a tip of the hat to T. S. Eliot's 'Wasteland' tarots, he reaches what he has envisioned:

If the only thing he wished was to escape from individual limitation, from categories, roles, to hear the thunder that rumbles in molecules, the mingling of prime and ultimate substances, this then is the path that opens to him through the Arcanum known as *The World*. (p. 62)

Se la sola cosa che lui voleva era uscire dalla limitazione individuale, dalle categorie, dai ruoli, sentire il tuono che romba nelle molecole, il mescolarsi delle sostanze prime ed ultime, ecco la via che gli si apre attraverso l'Arcano detto *Il Mondo*. (*Il castello dei destini incrociati*, 62)

Then, in a series of transformations that parallel several of Qfwfq's adventures and echo stories by Jules Verne and E. T. A. Hoffmann, the Waverer descends to the centre of the earth. There, he is chopped by swords into his prime elements, rises through the craters of volcanoes, risks imprisonment in crystal, and reappears 'through the painful blossoming of the forest' to become himself again, or possibly a double destined to take all the choices our original Knight of Cups had not taken. Put all this abstractly and we find that a figure from Renaissance epic ascends to an 'invisible city' presided over by Libra (Calvino's sign—see 'Exactitude'), decides to escape the choices inevitable in systems of minimal units by losing himself in the sea; he drowns in that primordial flux, is dismembered, reborn through mineral and vegetable existences to human, only to be faced with predetermined lack of choice and the promise that he will hang himself on a gallows. His adventures encapsulate many elements from Calvino's previous fictions, but end with suicide. Why?

Compare this to the 'castle' account that Roland (Orlando) gives of his love-madness. As he follows the enchantress Angelica into the forest

The whole wood seemed to say to him: 'Go no farther! Why are you deserting the metallic fields of war, realm of the discontinuous and the distinct, the congenial massacres where your talent excels in sundering and excluding, to venture now into green, mucilaginous Nature, among the coils of living continuity? The forest of love, Roland, is no place for you!' (p. 30)

Squarotti stress the bipartite nature, and the differing qualities of the two sections. Squarotti notes that loss of speech in the 'castle' section is more an adventure while in the 'tavern' part, it has tragic overtones.

Tutto il bosco pareva dirgli: —Non andare! Perché deserti i metallici campi di guerra, regno del discontinuo e del distinto, le congeniali carneficine in cui eccelle il tuo talento nello scomporre e nell'escludere, e t'avventuri nella verde mucillaginosa natura, tra le spire della continuità vivente? Il bosco dell'amore, Orlando, non è luogo per te! (p. 30)

When he persists and sees Angelica with a handsome youth whose abilities are prized 'in the moist depths of the female forest' ('nell'umido fondo del bosco femminile') more than Roland's sword, Roland goes mad: 'something in him broke, shattered, exploded, melted: all of a sudden the light of his intellect was extinguished; he was left in darkness' (p. 31) ('qualcosa si ruppe dentro di lui, saltò, si fulminò, si fuse, e tutt'a un tratto gli si spense il lume dell'intelletto e restò al buio' (pp. 31–2)). After his descent into the chaotic heart of things, he is found upside down, the tarot hanged man, looking serene, convinced that he understands that the world must be read in reverse. Faced with the erotic, the moist female forest, Roland cannot retain his boundaries of self, but loses all organizing frameworks in madness. His serenity perhaps signals that he is at his maddest, for Calvino characters are almost never serene. We can interpret the injunction to read in reverse as corresponding to the choices not taken in the story of the Waverer, to a negative space or matrix. If upside down is the opposite of rightside up, or reverse of forward, they are complements nevertheless and bear traces of each other.⁴

Superficially the two heroes differ: one pursues a woman, the other is fleeing a wedding feast, or at least from having to choose between two women. In truth, however, both are turning their backs on the discontinuous, the world made up of discrete units. The Waverer experiences these as choices, Roland as the hacking off of body parts, his acts of sundering and excluding. In rejecting the world of disjunct parts, they act as if anachronistically struck by Nietzsche's notion that analysis—dividing, framing, relating, identifying, and so forth—is death and destroys an original unity. Both draw back from previous activities in order to seek oneness with a flux that Calvino identifies with the feminine: the sea, through Madame Sosostriis, and the forest, likened to the female pubic jungle. Madness described in organic terms and reverse-hanging result for Roland. The Waverer undergoes a terrifying cycle of death and rebirth, and from such we expect insight, a shaman's vision perhaps. All we get though is the promise of suicidal hanging, an act that, by closing the throat, echoes the initial motif of the entire collection: deprivation of speech. Evidently in these stories, Calvino is exploring alternatives to his obsession with finding order, is looking for a way to go with the flow and

⁴ Cannon (1979–80) points out that Calvino's interest in unrealized possibilities, matrices, and complements recurs almost obsessively in this text. The obsession carries over to *If on a winter's night a traveler*. In 'Se una notte d'inverno un narratore', Calvino himself calls that novel a negative biography, the books he couldn't write.

not insist upon rigid system and pigeon-holed disjunctions. What he finds in these tales, however, bodes ill unless you consider madness the true sanity of an insane world.

These two stories suggest that flux is pressing Calvino's imagination hard, but they also suggest his turning his back on order and system. Is this also true of other stories? What variations or alternative paradigms do we find?

The Ingrate whose tale starts off the 'castle' collection does not consciously turn against system, but interestingly, his story begins with the death of his father, literally the absence of the Father, said by Lacan to underlie all narrative. Instead of submitting himself to patriarchal law and upholding it, he indulges himself with the forest Amazon who saved his life, and then abandons her for a wealthy bride. System and civilization ultimately depend on his upholding their order, and by bringing into the world a nameless, unacknowledged child, he finds himself up against a flux more ruthless and more ancient than the powers of the Father: Cybele, the Great Mother. Her priestess sentences him to the forest of self-loss and mingling. He must dismember himself (matriarchal priests were often eunuchs) and join the swarming maenads. When he resists, they fall upon him with sharp blades to maim him or torture him, unman him or tear him to pieces—'straziandolo' can mean all of these.

Roland and the Waverer abandon their systems of order and in turn are driven mad or destroyed by flux. The Ingrate self-indulgently turns his back on order, and is similarly destroyed. Calvino, though, does not simply uphold order. The Alchemist is a dutiful seeker after the Father, but does not thereby ensure himself happiness or success. He seeks the yellow king (gold, a Father figure, power), and offers the Devil the soul of a city in exchange. The Alchemist gets his wealth; his great gold mill produces abundance, and the city becomes one of metal. However, the maiden with water refuses to enter the city; its solid metals are inimical to her fluid spirit, and she states that the inhabitants of the city have no souls to lose. Those in the city do not suffer obvious torments, but the rule of gold produces soulless damnation in rigid metal, petrification, crystallization. Seeking order yields deadly order, and the fluid (and feminine) withdraws from joint participation in life.⁵ Here we see not the threats proffered by the feminine and the fluid, but the damnation of those who lack those qualities entirely. Evidently you are damned if you lose yourself in the flux, but equally damned if you rigidly exclude it from your life, damned if you abandon or subvert order but damned if you uphold it.

One group of tales loosely fits the formula of trespass, followed by

⁵ This passage draws commentary from Krzysztof Sobczykński, who notes the equation between woman and water, and explores their opposition to the mineral world of the city. His concept of mineral symbolism derives from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1971: 141–62), with its mineral, vegetable, animal, and human worlds.

punishment in the form of engulfment by flux, usually identifiable as a feminine force. Among these are the tales of the Ingrate, the Surviving Warrior, the King who discovers his wife to be a vampire, and the three tales of madness and death—the interwoven stories of Macbeth, Hamlet, and King Lear. In addition to stories of this pattern, we also find two other groups. The second might be called philosophical: to this group belongs the tale of an Alchemist, also identified as Faust, and in the 'tavern', we find Faust again, his tale intertwined with that of a highly intellectualized Parsifal. Astolpho is also caught up in intellectual matters that take him beyond infantile fears of engulfment. These philosophical tales directly address the problems of order-seeking. Faust declares that the world consists of a limited number of elements whose combinations mount into the billions, but whose permutations include very few that are meaningful, a tiny number amidst the roiling 'pulviscolo'. Parsifal replaces the metaphysic of order and flux with one based on existence and absence, and argues that life must be a Taoist balance between the two. Astolpho goes to the moon, hoping it will prove to be the complement of or matrix for earth. Our life is senseless, so perhaps sense can be found on lunar terrain. However, the Poet (il Bagatto) he meets says no: poetry concerns forests, fights, treasures, and coupling—activities of earth—and furthermore asserts that such activities point to the void, the centre of an empty horizon. In sum, Faust and Parsifal offer us slight but genuine hope of meaning while Astolpho, looking for reason and sense, finds only the void.

A third set of stories concerns figures who somehow stand partly outside the cards but in the frame: the narrator himself, a goddess, and the hostess of the castle. All three are credited with creating the novel. At the end of the 'castle' section, the card that had represented Angelica becomes the 'Joyous Goddess of Destruction' who governs the unmaking and remaking of the world through a shuffling of cards that represents a general massacre. In this Goddess as symbol for the life process and for the creation of the tarot tales, we find Calvino's metaphysic strongly present. The mathematical concepts of permutations and combinations are now added to the simple flux and particles of *Cosmicomics*, and the world's swirl of conflicts are 'vortici' amidst 'pulviscolo dorato' ('gilded dust').

In the very next paragraph, the narrator comes forward and confesses failure to trace his own tale amidst the 'pulviscolo delle storie', the 'dust of the tales'. The minimal units are not, perhaps, able to produce everything. While the narrator seems relieved at not having to bare himself, the failure of minimal units to match experience is one of the points at which we see the inadequacy of literature as means of making sense of life. His personal tale may be lost—or he unwilling to see or

share it with us—but when we remember combinatorial theory and Barthes' newly fashionable author-is-dead slogan, the narrator's disappearance into the particles here is appropriate, if less interesting than his reappearance at the end of the 'tavern' section.

At the end of 'castle', the narrator gives over his author/ity not only to the Joyous Goddess but to the Hostess, whose fate is much like that of other Amazons in these stories—betrayal by the male political and social system. But all of a sudden, she is alone, the table set only for two, and the array of cards appears to be her own game of solitaire, which she plays out to its end, and then gathers and reshuffles, only to begin again. Other travellers have disappeared, including the narrator. She and she alone governs the cards. In the first version of 'castle', published separately with the photographic reproductions of the cards, her ontological position is even stranger, for she pays attention to 'every card play' and 'every turn of the page in this dovetailed assemblage of stories' ('ogni tirar di carte' and 'ogni volger di pagina in questo incastro di racconti' (Tarocchi, 142)). In this prior version, she does not start a new game; she exists outside the book, capable of seeing its pages, and yet creating the sequences we have just read as taking place simultaneously to the narrator's experience. In other words, she can look at a published book memorializing the sequences at the same time that she is creating them—a logically vertiginous strange loop of the sort celebrated in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.⁶

Well along in the 'tavern' section, the narrator again tries to tell his tale, and this time does lay down a file of cards. The Marseilles pack's King of Clubs appears to be holding a huge ball-point pen, an appropriate emblem for one to whom writing is so important. Attempts to produce significant signs, however, are blocked by dry ink-wells, and he willingly seeks the Devil, considers the Marquis de Sade as a model (because devilish subjects, dark imaginings, are the basis of literature) and then considers the source of these symbols: 'In writing, what speaks is what is repressed' (p. 102), the insight of 'Sigismondo di Vindobona' or Sigmund of Vienna. The narrator dutifully looks for the Oedipus story, which is repressed in all of us, but seeking it allows him to escape from exposing his own story, which thus remains repressed. However, he presents us with a symbolic self-portrait as 'Il bagatto'—the mounte-

⁶ Calvino has created other such strange loops. As Welch D. Everman points out, he did it with Bradamante's writing in *The Nonexistent Knight*, and will do so again in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, with the *mise en abyme* structures involving Silas Flannery's diary and his urge to write the book we are reading, as well as the external reader's finishing *If on a winter's night a traveler* at the same moment that the internal Reader is finishing the book of that title that has been written about himself—and so forth. For discussions of these strange loops and *mise en abyme* structures and aporias, see Bencivenga, Everman, Lavagetto, and Gabellone.

bank, juggler, or conjuror—even, perhaps, writer as *bricoleur*, and the same card that represented the poet in Astolpho's story.⁷ As another substitute for a linear narrative about self, the narrator then offers us his brilliant meditation upon SS George and Jerome as portrayed in famous paintings, his projections of self as man-of-action (obliquely treated as not fully credible) and man of contemplation and writing, with a passion for intellectual order. Both dragon and lion are projections of psyche, the personal and perhaps the collective unconscious. The narrator, conjuror-like, ties the two figures together in a neat, composite self-portrait and then evasively dissolves the unity, frustrating our desire for closure and for information about himself.

In both the somewhat different English and Italian versions of the Note at the end, Calvino refers to his original plan to do a 'motel' section, whose minimal units would come from newspaper comic strips. Although never written, this project resonates with Calvino's earliest contact with narrative. In the Norton lecture on visibility, he describes the entertainment he derived from comics while still too young to read:

I would spend hours following the cartoons of each series from one issue to another, while in my mind I told myself the stories, interpreting the scenes in different ways—I produced variants, put together the single episodes into a story of broader scope, thought out and isolated and then connected the recurring elements in each series, mixing up one series with another, and invented new series in which the secondary characters became protagonists. (*Six Memos*, 93)

Passavo le ore percorrendo i cartoons d'ogni serie da un numero all'altro, mi raccontavo mentalmente le storie interpretando le scene in diversi modi, producevo delle varianti, fondevo i singoli episodi in una storia più ampia, scoprivo e isolavo e collegavo delle costanti in ogni serie contaminavo una serie con l'altra, immaginavo nuove serie in cui personaggi secondari diventavano protagonisti. (*Lezioni americane*, 93)

And of course, conjuror-fashion, he has given us a fourth mode of pictorial poesis in the saints' paintings. Buried as a digression among the tarots, it none the less backhandedly supplies us with another narrative-generator, and by never using the comics, Calvino intimates his own wealth of imaginative power. He does not even need to follow up all possible schemes. Given what he makes of a freak-show display or of vials of sand in *Collezione di sabbia*, he could presumably have produced any number of literary machines, were machines what he needed and wanted.⁸

⁷ Schneider (1980) analyses various complex projections of self in such forms as Bagatto, Devil, and Faust.

⁸ This absent third novella or part provokes very different reactions. To Schneider (1980), its absence is a sign of the writer's inevitable failure, even 'suicide'. To those who take a negative view of the combinatorics, this signals the exhaustion of literature (see Squarotti,

We have thus tales of transgression and engulfment, tales of philosophical search, and digressions concerning figures in the frame; they all evoke dark fantasies. This brings us back to the question of what is repressed that speaks in writing, and of why so many dark fantasies haunt a work devoted to literary structures? Begin with the first waking nightmare: the travellers are deprived of speech. To a writer, one of whose concerns is writer's block, the inability to communicate is a dire threat. It is also symbolically appropriate to the image complex associated with engulfment by the female forest. In *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, a Freudian explication of how literature works upon us, Norman Holland makes the following points about speaking and writing as symbolic acts:

A common defense against oral fusion and merger is putting something out of the mouth instead of taking something in; the something is usually speech, as in a great deal of Shakespeare's or Lawrence's writing, though it may be almost anything—in the Keats poem, it is the nightingale's 'pouring forth thy soul abroad' that signifies the bird is 'not born for death'. (1975: 37)

Holland goes on to argue that 'writers emit words as a way of defending against the fearful desire to obliterate oneself in a total at-oneness with some primal mother. It may be so—at least, fantasies of and defenses against primitive wishes for fusion appear in almost all literature' (p. 38). By imposing muteness on his spokesman, Calvino denies himself a major defence against fusion, and fusion with forms of flux menaces him on all sides: the forest, the cards figuring powerful and enigmatic women, and the maze of narrative sequences he has constructed. At one stage, in fact, the two-dimensional crossword pattern was to have been three-dimensional, which would greatly have magnified the nightmarish complexities of the labyrinth.

In place of speech, he proffers the manipulation of minimal units, the cards, and the tentative interpretations made by a mind desperate for communication and meaning. This produces new and parallel tensions. Literature as a system for ordering formlessness shows its fragility when Calvino exposes its dependence upon the presuppositions that we can understand what we read and that a story is meaningful. We learn through our resistance to the narrator's arbitrary-seeming interpretations that such presuppositions are shakily founded. Even the narrator admits defeat when faced by a run of cards signifying only number and

1988) or the rather apocalyptic vision of literature begetting more literature without human intervention, golem-fashion (Genot). To those who take a more positive view of combinatorics, the suggestion of another generator of narrative is just one more sign of the fecundity of the system that defies exhaustion: 'one comforting thought . . . [is that] other patterns, other meaningful sequences are bound to emerge if we are patient—sequences of greater beauty, of greater utility, of greater power to excite our senses and delight our aesthetic tastes than those we previously admired.' (McCaffery, 1982: 22)

suit rather than the pictorial arcana. He also tacitly admits the hermeneutic problem posed by his crossword creation: the same sign has four significations. The Ace of Cups serves as the city Paris besieged by the Moors, Troy seen by Helen, an aerial or even celestial city, and a metropolis associated with the dead, an Inferno perhaps. Come the Marseilles deck, we find yet more significations for the same cards. In a story about Helen, we might expect Troy to be the city, though a city named Paris has a certain serendipitous relevance, and hence cannot entirely be eliminated. Traces, endlessly deferred meaning: we learn about these the hard way as we watch the play of signifiers. For a writer seeking meaning, this self-deconstructed text offers little comfort. Despite his own belief in writing as a mode of learning, expressed in the interview with Alexander Stille (1985), Calvino's experiments here undermine that foundational belief, and naturally produce anxieties.

The stories Calvino reinscribes touch upon some of the high points in Western literature: Homer, Grail quests, Renaissance epic romances, the Faust story, Shakespeare, de Sade, Freud. We find a reference to Stendhal as author of the sort of books Calvino does not write—studies of the dynamics of love. The array is by no means the full canon: the stories of Stendhal and his ilk do not appear, nor does the lyric tradition. *Orlando Furioso* outweighs the social panorama of *I promessi sposi*, the sexual explicitness of Alberto Moravia, and the regional politics of Elio Vittorini. Chosen by whatever logic, this uneven spectrum of literary possibilities shares an inability to offer any acceptable structure for experience to Calvino at this point in his career. These stories lead to madness, dismemberment of the speaker (thus partaking in the Orphic *sparagmos*), hanging, damnation, and images of endless reshuffling of the cards. Epic, chivalric romance, alchemy (or science), and metafictional solitaire deny him any theoretical means of staving off dissolution or fusion. One repressed insight that speaks through the text therefore is the fear that speech and writing are inadequate to experience, and hence cannot produce any meaning from it.

By invoking Freud, Calvino ruefully adverts to another form of repressed material that speaks through him despite his preferences for privacy. The psychoanalytic repressed seethes in the anxious images of these stories. Indeed, as unassuaged infantile anxieties and their resultant metaphysic of self and dissolution into flux, such psychoanalytic material makes its presence felt at several levels within the novel: the personalistic, the transpersonal or cultural, and the metafictional. The personalistic material responds to the terminology of Freud and Lacan. The transpersonal is clarified through the somewhat different concepts of Jung and Neumann, and of Lacan again. The metafictional can be said to rely on Barthes and the narratologists for its vocabulary.

Let us start with the threatening female forces of flux. At the person-

alistic level, the fearsome mother figure presumably derives from Calvino's infantile experience with his own immediate family members. For whatever reason, the infant self finds her a threat to that sense of self, a figure who demands obedience, judges and condemns, a tribunal from which there is no appeal. We also note that, compared to this dominating figure, the fatherly figures lack substance and power. Cosimo's father is powerless, and the non-existent knight's is absent. Qfwfq usually lacks parents, but in 'At Daybreak', both father and mother are ineffectual, the strong, irritating female presence being supplied by the grandmother. This configuration pervades the fiction: fear of a female who is felt as engulfing, and difficulty relating to a distant father figure, whose system of order is unacceptable. Hence all the avatars of dissolving flux, and hence, too, the thwarted search for order, a value symbolically associated with the Father.

At the transpersonal level, that threatening female force is the unconscious. Erich Neumann (1954, 1963), a Jungian, labels consciousness male, and the unconscious, female and he considers this polarization deeply relevant to the development of civilization, and sees it as recapitulated within each individual. The Great Mother, archetype of the unconscious, may be nurturing as well as terrifying and destructive, and unconsciousness is something we crave as well as something we strive imperfectly to control; after all, we cannot hold off sleep for ever. In transpersonal terms, the fears of fusion and of castration are not primarily anxieties regarding one's own body members, but images representing the fragility of consciousness when dealing with the devouring power of unconsciousness.

This transpersonal explanation of the threatening female figure resonates well with the surface meanings and metaphysic in Calvino's fictions: self dissolving into flux and becoming lost, makes sense as questing consciousness dissolving into the unconscious. In this novel, that spark of awareness is menaced by uncharted depths when confronting the hermeneutic process we rely on for our interpretations. Calvino's powers of extrapolation can lead him from any detail that catches his fancy to voids in the adjacent systems of control. At this non-personalistic level, the image becomes philosophical as well as psychological.

In both the personalistic and the transpersonal, symbolic mode, the Lacanian absent Father takes his place in the fictions. The son must resolve the castration fears and accept a passive, subordinate role with regard to the Father in order to fit into the family system of order. Having accepted such a position permits one to ascend within the system, and having absorbed its values, impose them on others as part of a seamless web of power. In other words, a meaning-system or system of order can be inherited. Calvino, however, keeps refusing to accept the rule of the

Father, and as a result cannot inherit the order system, but must seek his own. Refusal to accept a system makes it difficult to impose one. Hence much of his continuous fictional quest for order.

The Castle of Crossed Destinies mostly depicts the absences of symbolic Fathers rather than active resistance to them: the death of the King of Coins, for instance, seems to have freed the Knight of Cups to go on his wanderings. To find deliberate rejections of the Father, we need to look further afield. 'La strada di San Giovanni' shows the narrator refusing to learn his father's botanical lore. The arboreal Cosimo rejects his father and his father's code entirely, and the story is replete with castration images. Perhaps the most concentrated form of father rejection turns up in 'La decapitazione dei Capi', a dreamily gruesome 'utopian' fiction in which leaders are mutilated to remind them of their answerability, and as they rise, they lose more extremities. After holding the highest office, they are executed.⁹

At personalistic and transpersonal levels, then, Calvino's dark images fit the forces representing flux and the imposition of order. The question remains of why they emerge so intensely in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. Why does metafiction call up such a storm on Calvino's emotional horizons? And in what sense does the metafictional material represent the repressed that speaks?

His fascination with 1960s narratology was doubtless nurtured by the congruence between its picture of literature and his own mental structures, his metaphysics featuring a particulate reality.¹⁰ Vladimir Propp's functions, Greimas's actants, Lévi-Strauss's binary oppositions, repetitions, and mediations, and the general narratological flow of terms like narremes and mythemes or mythologemes all affirm that literature consists of basic units to be shuffled. Like the elements in the periodic table, these particles can produce nearly endless variety. As with chemi-

⁹ Calvino mentions this story in an interview with Ludovica Ripa di Meana, and exhibits discomfort over it, though expressed in non-personalistic terms: 'I have to be restrained by a, shall we say, extra-poetic worry, that is that what one writes as allegory might be taken literally. For example, a decade ago or so I was set to write a book, *Beheading the Heads*, in which I proposed as the perfect system of government the execution of all rulers as a rite performed at regular intervals. Then I thought: "But what if something of this sort should happen?" and I stopped there and left it in the drawer. I did the correct thing: you never know how they will interpret you' ('... posso essere frenato da una preoccupazione diciamo extra poetica, cioè che quel che si scrive come allegoria possa essere preso alla lettera. Per esempio una decina d'anni fa mi ero messo a scrivere un libro, *La decapitazione dei Capi*, in cui proponevo come sistema perfetto di governo l'esecuzione capitale di tutti i governanti, come un rito a scadenze regolari. Poi ho pensato: "Ma se poi succedesse davvero qualcosa del genere?" e ho piantato lì tutto e l'ho lasciato nel cassetto. Ho fatto bene: non si sa mai come ti possono interpretare' (Di Meana, 1980: 88)).

¹⁰ As Fusco notes, Calvino appears to be playing upon Saussure's Signifiant/Signifié or Lacan's S/s when he uses the Two of Coins card with its great S-shape. Other structuralist and Saussurean concerns are discussed by Corti (1978a). She points out that in cartomancy the meaning of any one card depends upon its placement within the system of a cast.

cals, some combinations work and others do not, some are meaningful and others, not.

Calvino wants to be able to identify and understand what works and what does not. Were structuralism indeed the science that it claimed to be, it should have enabled him to predict and analyse and deliberately create this most important component of fiction. Calvino optimistically describes the permutational production of such meaning in 'Myth in the Narrative': the tribal storyteller 'goes on permuting jaguars and toucans until there comes a moment when one of his innocent little stories explodes into a terrible revelation: a myth, which demands to be recited in secret and in a sacred place' (p. 79).¹¹ With tarots in place of toucans and jaguars, though, can he create such meaning or ensure that we understand it when we read?

The answer is 'no'. The gap between card formations and interpretation is too wide. He can give us a card version of Parsifal or Lear, but no flash of revelation results. Furthermore, if several readers were given those card sequences without commentary and told to produce appropriate tales, the chances of their coming up with Lear or Parsifal is remote in the extreme. In this sense, science is a more satisfying narrative; the gap between story and interpretation is usually much narrower. At this metafictional level, one form of flux is meaninglessness, and dissolution into that flux seems inescapable. The Joyous Goddess who reduces everything to random fragments appears to have more authority than the author.

The repressed not only speaks in writing, it interprets for us what we read. We see the repressed influencing reading when Calvino gives us the interpretive process filtered through a specific consciousness. What the narrator derives from the cards as their story is not necessarily what we would deduce, given the same sequence. His unconscious and ours respond to those images in different fashions. Our absent, unconscious material governs what we become conscious of when we read literature. The writer's repressed emerges in the oral and Oedipal anxieties; somebody with other anxieties would probably not be so attracted to the notion of trying to control flux by means of minimal units. A writer with an orientation towards Deleuze and Guattari-style 'schizophrenia', for instance, would break structures and overflow boundaries rather than construct a maze of interlocking and mutually dependent tales.

Thus it is we find different levels of significance—personalistic, transpersonal, and metafictional—for the fantasy of dissolution into flux so strongly present in the tarot tales. We also see some of the reasons that Calvino's probe into literature as a meaning system produced such

¹¹ Calvino explored this idea in several essays; the earliest version I have found is in 'Cibernetica e fantasmi' (1967).

anguished results. The traditional answers to 'why read?' and 'why write?' crumble when exposed to the instability of meaning. Calvino struggles beyond simple flux by imposing his combinatorial method on it, and in this sense attempts to go beyond the problems he set himself in the cosmicomical stories. However, this tactic is frustrated by the irreducible mystery that governs the production of meaning through permutations. That mystery is beyond control.

Other critics will develop different analyses of the personal, transpersonal, and metafictional tensions, or find other viewpoints entirely. The psychoanalytic certainly need not be privileged. The very paradigm of these stories—one card means four different things in any specific crossword formation—demands that we do not limit ourselves to one meaning or approach. Most psychological images are over-determined. In this sometimes nightmarish collection of tales dealing with fears and anxieties, we should expect such condensation.

‘I read, therefore *it* writes’:

The author by Descartes out of Barthes

The Castle of Crossed Destinies asks not only where literature comes from and how it is generated, but also how it is able to order experience. Calvino ruefully concludes that the act of interpretation makes any generalized derivation of meaning impossible. *If on a winter's night a traveler* then goes on from this foundation, and explores why we read, if not for such structuring, and why write. In a way it answers *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. Let us grant the subjectivity of interpretation: what then makes those activities of reading and writing so compelling? Possibly because the compulsion is real, Calvino can be more cheerful. Whatever theoretically explains the drive—or even if it fails to be explicable—the drive does operate, and can be enjoyed, so Calvino's exploration remains sunny.

The change in tone, the minimal unit being multiplied, the developments in Calvino's metaphysic are all visible in 'Without fear of wind or vertigo'. The unit that serves as theme for variations consists of a woman and two men, and the man who focuses the narrative is threatened with annihilation from an organizational complex, in this instance, a revolutionary committee. None of Calvino's previous minimal units has demanded such a complex set of social relationships. All the stories use this same structure; Calvino was experimenting in the fashion of Queneau in *Exercices de style* (1947), but whereas in Queneau the repetition is unmistakable, Calvino proudly notes in 'Se una notte d'inverno un narratore' that none of the reviewers spotted this invariant

core. In other words, Calvino's designs were so compellingly different each from each, that the sameness of plot eluded critics.¹²

The relative optimism of tone shows in several features of the story. The narrator of this novel incipit feels so well-entrenched in his life, despite the unsettled times, that he admits to feeling in harmony with others, or rather—he hastens to modify so extravagant a claim—in harmony with the disharmony of others. This psychic assurance can be maintained because the void plagues not him but the female character: she panics on the iron bridge, she invokes void, gap, chasm, abyss, emptiness; she suffers vertigo. She loads a revolver and flirts with Russian roulette, feeling the pull of the void that opens as she stares down the barrel of the gun. She threatens him with the gun, claiming that the real revolution will come when women are armed and men disarmed, and only then does he feel a flicker of alarm. This threat, though still one of rule by armed females, is a far cry from the self-pitying, maimed anguish of the surviving warrior in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*.

As the sexual triangle develops, consisting of Irina, Valerian, and the narrator, Alex, she becomes goddess and priestess, and they her erotic slaves. Such sensual extravagance is unusual in Calvino, but both its intensity and the humour with which he treats it add to the playful tone of the tale. Like the Magna Mater of Mediterranean cults, Irina is associated with serpents, serpentine lines, spirals, and shadows. Hilari-ously, she echoes the stance of the goddess holding two serpents:

There are two serpents whose heads Irina grasps with her hands, and they react to her grasp, intensifying their own aptitude for rectilinear penetration, while she was insisting, on the contrary, that the maximum of controlled power should correspond to a reptile pliability bending to overtake her in impossible contortions. (*If on a winter's night a traveler*, 89)

Sono due teste di serpente che Irina afferra con ambe le mani, e che reagiscono alla sua stretta esasperando la propria attitudine alla penetrazione rettilinea, mentre lei pretendeva al contrario che il massimo di forza contenuta corrispon- desse a una duttilità di rettile che si pieghi a raggiungerla in contorcimenti impossibili. (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 88)

In admitting that he and Valerian 'abandon the standard idea of vertical-ity, of the straight line, the surviving ill-concealed male pride that had remained with us' (p. 89) ('abdicassimo al partito preso della verticalità, della linea retta, il superstita malriposto orgoglio maschile che ancora ci aveva seguito' (p. 88)). Calvino harks back to *The Baron in the Trees* and *The Cloven Viscount*, whose protagonists both strove for verticality and

¹² As usual, critics have been drawn to the variety rather than the sameness. Orenco quotes Calvino on various authors he is supposed to have imitated—Borges, Nabokov, O'Brien, Grass, Singer, and Boris Vian among others. Jan Kjaerstad quotes Calvino on a conceptual debt to *Ulysses*, with its chapters each in a different style.

resisted horizontality. The apparent willingness to accept horizontality rather than flee it looks forward to 'Under the Jaguar Sun', where Calvino explores that mental concession from a male in greater detail.

Nor is the narrator helpless or passive. He senses trouble, and searches for the piece of paper that turns out to be his own death warrant. Furthermore, he makes this search in the midst of a torrid entanglement: he can only search in the shadow of Irina's lowered eyelids while she cries and writhes, and only by slithering, snake like, across the room. Hence, he enters the sensual vortex yet manages to keep from being engulfed; he makes horizontality work for him.

Even in a fairly threatening story, 'In a network of lines that intersect', we find Calvino exploring escapes from the metaphysical crisis of dissolution into flux. The protagonist of this Borgesian fiction is a businessman with a passion for kaleidoscopes and other mechanisms that multiply images through use of mirrors. He has built his empire on a principle of mirror-multiplication, and now this principle governs his life. To escape kidnap attempts, he multiplies his own image: five Mercedes sedans take off, each apparently occupied by the protagonist; he creates false love-nests to distract from the true identity and location of his mistress; he creates counter-plots and counter-counter-plots to foil kidnappers. Despite precautions he ends up kidnapped and trapped in his own prized hall of mirrors, which multiplies images an infinite number of times. His mistress is already there, tied up, and his wife has apparently masterminded the abduction, probably for revenge, though she claims solicitude. She has lost her bearings in this theatre of mirrors, and as the narrator seeks the egress, he also finds himself lost in the reflections:

I am lost, I seem to have lost myself, I cannot see my reflection but only theirs. In a fragment of Novalis, an adept who has managed to reach the secret dwelling of Isis lifts the veil of the goddess. . . . Now it seems to me that everything that surrounds me is a part of me, that I have managed to become the whole, finally . . . (p. 168)

mi perdo, mi sembra d'aver perduto me stesso, non vedo il mio riflesso ma solo il loro. In un frammento di Novalis un iniziato che è riuscito a raggiungere la dimora segreta di Iside solleva il velo della dea. . . . Ora mi sembra che tutto quello che mi circonda sia una parte di me, che io sia riuscito a diventare il tutto, finalmente . . . (p. 168)

The multiplied female images of mistress and wife replicate the compliant sex-object and the virago, the latter sporting tight boots, a gun, her hands knobby with rings, her thin lips drawn back from excessively white teeth. In their replication, they merge into the goddess Isis, and at the divine unveiling, the narrator finds himself subsumed, but at the same time, he has become the whole ('diventare il tutto'), not just been swallowed. Any control he may have is tenuous, but he does not appear

to find this rupture of the barriers of self as traumatic as those suffered by tarot tellers in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*.

Basic attitudes towards cosmic flux remain the same, but have somehow become de-dramatized. The Reader, for instance, is reminded by the unnamed authorial voice that 'The thing that most exasperates you is to find yourself at the mercy of the fortuitous, the aleatory, the random' (p. 27) ('La cosa che ti esaspera di più è trovarti alla mercé del fortuito, dell'aleatorio, del probabilistico' (p. 27)). Exasperation is a far cry from blind panic and anguish at the threat of dissolution. Or consider Calvino's ability to plunge through successive levels of reality by focusing on any one surface; sometimes such a plunge is a serious metaphysical ordeal, but in *If on a winter's night a traveler* he seems to be parodying his ability or at any rate enjoying it for the giddy rush. The narrator fantasizes what he would like to do to the defective book:

You fling the book on the floor, you would hurl it out of the window, even out of the closed window, through the slats of the Venetian blinds; let them shred its incongruous quires, let sentences, words, morphemes, phonemes gush forth, beyond recomposition into discourse; through the panes, and if they are of unbreakable glass so much the better, hurl the book and reduce it to photons, undulatory vibrations, polarized spectra; through the wall, let the book crumble into molecules and atoms passing between atom and atom of the reinforced concrete, breaking up into electrons, neutrons, neutrinos, elementary particles more and more minute; through the telephone wires, let it be reduced to electronic impulses, into flow of information, shaken by redundancies and noises, and let it be degraded into a swirling entropy. (p. 26)

Scagli il libro contro il pavimento, lo lanceresti fuori dalla finestra, anche fuori dalla finestra chiusa, attraverso le lame delle persiane avvolgibili, che triturino i suoi incongrui quinterni, le frasi le parole i morfemi i fonemi zampillino senza potersi più ricomporre in discorso; attraverso i vetri, se sono vetri infrangibili meglio ancora, scaraventare il libro ridotto a fotoni, vibrazioni ondulatorie, spettri polarizzati; attraverso il muro, che il libro si sbricioli in molecole e atomi passando tra atomo e atomo del cemento armato, scomponendosi in elettroni neutroni neutrini particelle elementari sempre più minute; attraverso i fili del telefono, che si riduca in impulsi elettronici, in flusso d'informazione, squassato da ridondanze e rumori, e si degradi in una vorticoso entropia. (p. 26)

And this is less than half the total fantasia! From invisibly small units like this, Calvino switches to the macroscopic constituents of reality, and goes on to picture the book hurtling beyond the common market, beyond the stratosphere to the edge of the expanding galaxies to some form of ultimate non-being.

In earlier works, this vision would probably have developed a vertiginous quality designed to lead us to existential nausea. The multiplying, ever-smaller units would have become less and less controllable, and the organizing consciousness more and more despairing of holding

them in organized form. In this de-dramatized instance, the Reader blows off steam, and then quite composedly takes the book back to the bookseller.

In most of the novel incipits, the narrator is threatened with flux but remains—for a Calvino character—quite calm. Instead, we feel the threat to be more serious when it is aimed at works of literature, as it is in the numbered chapters. Again we find displacement; fear of the void affects others, not the protagonist; threat to bodily integrity haunts literature, not the male persona. A novel existing only in a computer may be turned to meaningless units as the computer spits out a list of 'the's and 'and's. More sinister, perhaps, is a computer analysis of style with its frequency word-lists and their all too revelatory indices of hidden values.¹³ Lotaria and her seminar dismember the chapter they study (castrate may not be too strong a term, given the evident authorial disapproval of her approach).¹⁴ Also dangerous to books is the state censorship seen in some incipits. Forgers and copyright pirates render some of the texts inauthentic. Book pages may be glued together and the books built into sculptures, or the quires may be shuffled and misbound at the bindery. With each turn of the adventure, the individual book, the *œuvre* of an author, or literature in general is threatened with one form of extinction or another. Yet even when portraying such destructive forces, Calvino remains relatively cheerful, perhaps because the impulse to tell stories continues, and so does the impulse to keep reading. In his introductory remarks prior to *Six Memos*, Calvino expresses confidence that there are some things literature can do that other media cannot. Literature should survive the millennium of the book, he insists.

Moreover, literature gains power from being shared. The advent of the Lettrice or Other Reader, Ludmilla, gives the Reader great impetus to pursue his enquiries into the disrupted and defective texts. The chance to talk to her about his successes and failures, the possibility of discussing the literature and enjoying it together, drives him to unwonted applications of energy and purpose. Indeed, his pursuit of literature becomes a triangular desire; Ludmilla seems primarily motivated by her love for books, and we sometimes wonder why she tolerates the somewhat boorish Reader. He starts as interested in books, but ends up by exerting himself far more to win her regard than to satisfy his own urges to read. He pursues texts in order to pursue her. He also seeks out others—Cavadegna, Uzzi-Tuzii, Lotaria—anyone who might put him on to the

¹³ In *Small World* David Lodge portrays an author who becomes totally blocked, unable to write anything, after being shown such an analysis of his style. Once he learns the secret value underlying his world—'grease'—his selfconsciousness prevents his drawing upon that value.

¹⁴ De Lauretis (1989) attacks Calvino's portrayal of women, his inability to understand feminists, and his traditional assumptions of the reader as femalely passive, the writer as a masculine penetrator.

missing novel. More than any previous Calvino protagonist, this one interacts with a complex social world, and does so because of his literary desires. Indeed, Marilyn Orr goes so far as to argue that 'the final lesson they learn from the books is that the book is not all. When they have learned this, they are ready to engage the world from which the books derive and to which they point. The Readers receive from the storyteller the final counsel—to put down the book' (1985: 217).

In addition to lending itself to pleasurable conversation, literature is also able to provide variety for our everyday lives. In each numbered chapter, Ludmilla describes the kind of book she would like next to read—and that is what we get in the next incipit. At one point she wants mistiness and lack of definition; at another, kitchen-sink realism; at other times, she asks for a pile-up of stories without philosophy, or mysteries passed through a precise and cold mind.¹⁵ Not only do the settings of these stories expose the Readers to exotic locations and people of unusual professions, the pursuit of the texts takes them, especially the First Reader, to strange lands as well. Neither of these protagonists is leading a desperate life demanding literature as an opiate. Literature provides escape, but not so much as an alternative to life as an ornamentation or augmentation: the Readers can read in bed as well as make love there. The two pleasures coalesce at many levels.¹⁶

This leads us to consider the value of reading. The readers in the library all have their own notions of how it works and why they value that activity. These readers represent well-documented facets of Calvino himself. One reader never reads more than a few pages without falling into inexhaustible universes. Another responds to reading as a manipulation of minimal units. Note the presence of nearly all Calvino's favourite metaphysical conceits in this particular reader's analysis:

Reading is a discontinuous and fragmentary operation. Or, rather, the object of reading is a punctiform and pulviscular material. In the spreading expanse of the writing, the reader's attention isolates some minimal segments, juxtapositions of words, metaphors, syntactic nexuses, logical passages, lexical peculiarities that prove to possess an extremely concentrated density of meaning. They are like elemental particles making up the work's nucleus, around which all the rest revolves. Or else like the void at the bottom of a vortex which sucks in and

¹⁵ We find clashing responses to Ludmilla's demands for a different kind of fiction when she is scarcely launched in the one previously demanded. To some critics she is the innocent reader (Wood, 1981) or an amateur (Perroud); to the philosophical Salvatori, Ludmilla stands condemned for not developing a dialogue with the text, but simply reading for fun and escape. Some praise her dedication and openness, seeing in her an avatar of Calvino himself (Ricci, 1982; Feinstein), which Calvino reinforces with his statement, 'Ludmilla sono io' (Orengo); Garboli sees her as the author who calls the texts into being. Feinstein, who makes much of the parallels between reading and sex, sees her insatiability as a variant on female sexual rapacity: 'Ludmilla cannot be satisfied textually by Calvino or any number of authors' (p. 153).

¹⁶ Orr and Badley explicate the social dimensions of reading in this novel.

swallows currents. It is through these apertures that, in barely perceptible flashes, the truth the book may bear is revealed, its ultimate substance. Myths and mysteries consist of impalpable little granules, like the pollen that sticks to the butterfly's legs; only those who have realized this can expect revelations and illuminations. (p. 254)

la lettura è un'operazione discontinua e frammentaria. O meglio: l'oggetto della lettera è una materia puntiforme e pulviscolare. Nella dilagante distesa della scrittura l'attenzione del lettore distingue dei segmenti minimi, accostamenti di parole, metafore, nessi sintattici, passaggi logici, peculiarità lessicali che si rivelano d'una densità di significato estremamente concentrata. Sono come le particelle elementari che compongono il nucleo dell'opera, attorno al quale ruota tutto il resto. Oppure come il vuoto al fondo d'un vortice, che aspira e inghiotte le correnti. È attraverso questi spiragli che, per lampi appena percettibili, si manifesta la verità che il libro può portare, la sua sostanza ultima. Miti e misteri consistono di granellini impalpabili come il polline che resta sulle zampe delle farfalle; solo chi ha capito questo può attendersi rivelazioni e illuminazioni. (pp. 256-7)

Another of these readers prefers rereading—each reading is so different. Another feels that in one's cumulative reading, all books merge into one. Some prefer beginnings and others revel in endings. So it goes. As usual, Calvino disdains the single, simplistic answer: reading is X. Instead, we receive an array of possibilities that work for individuals at particular instants, a pulviscular answer to a particulate problem. Any combination of these urges to read may fit our own individual profile as readers. Once we remember the generative power of combinatorics, we realize that the ways of locking into literature become extremely varied, even if you only consider the limited set of combinations derivable from this group of readers.

Another reason for reading is for the tenuous relationship one establishes with the mysterious authorial voice. Calvino treats this voice as a kind of ghost, and plays variations on ghosts throughout this novel.¹⁷ The Other Reader is not physically present when the Reader starts for the second time on his book, but he feels that he is no longer solitary; the act has become an act of communication between them. In Professor Uzzi-Tuzii's office, Ludmilla denies the ghosts of the unwritten. The professor's own relationship to reality is ghostly: the Reader speculates that the professor can slip through interstices, can be engulfed by a chasm in the novel itself. Later, when the Readers make love, the First Reader frets that perhaps Ludmilla is detaching details of what she senses about him and constructing a ghostly partner in her own mind, and she will respond to this construct rather than to the Reader himself. The author as

¹⁷ Geoffrey Green traces Calvino's terms 'ghosts' and 'shadows' to Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*: 'The text needs its shadow: this shadow is a bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro' (Green, 1986: 102).

ghost then makes him somewhat jealous, a 'silent voice' that communes with her in books, a 'ghost with a thousand faces' who is yet faceless. Marana, among his many functions a *ghost*-writer, argues that behind books is only the void. Calvino though seems to argue that at least there is an authorial voice of some sort, somehow accessible, though its presence and power may be no more subject to scientific verification than are ghosts. Ludmilla certainly enjoys her contact with this voice through reading. The author as actual person is of no interest at all to her, but that voice lures her on.

Calvino offers us one very good reason for harkening to that voice; the voice enjoys immense power, and by following its lead, we too may bask in that power. Nowhere is this relationship more evident than in the disturbing, delicious apocalypse, 'What story down there awaits its end?' The precise and finicky narrator erases from his world all that irritates him. Thus the pretentious architecture of a ministry building is first turned to slab glass, but the building itself remains oppressive, so he erases the entire structure and several others, and apparently feels a gardener's enjoyment at pruning such tangles. People in uniform are abolished; then since he inadvertently included firemen and postmen, he abolishes fires and mail. The university and the courts, museums and theatres all vanish. An assertive petulance delightfully surfaces: 'If they think respect for culture is going to stop me, they're wrong' (p. 247) ('Se credono di potermi fermare col rispetto della cultura, si sbagliano' (p. 250)). At this point, we respond not just to the narrator's power over our institutions, but to the author's wraithlike touch. The narrator is serious, and shows no sense of humour. However, Calvino invites us to find him funny, so we relish this narrator's sorcery with city scenery while enjoying the power beyond or above his of relishing him as well.¹⁸

The ghost voice of the author also makes its presence faintly sensed in the narrator's disastrous discovery that he has reduced his world to a blank sheet of paper. With that metafictional symbolism, most readers will withdraw a measure of identification with the narrator because he thus becomes less of a character and more a symbol of authorship. We watch him from above rather than see the denouement through his eyes. We do not even learn whether he manages to leap the last abyss to join Franziska. However, the cheerful if conservative picture of the ideal rendezvous—a charming, flirtatious woman in a café with mirrors,

¹⁸ Or rather, most of us do. Orenco reports, 'this last apocalyptic fable produced a telephone call from Paolo Spriano to the author, in which the historian of the PCI complained that "What story down there awaits its end?" had caused him terrible anguish, the picture of the world being rubbed out a bit at a time along the Prospect of a soviet city' ('quest'ultimo apologo apocalittico ha provocato una telefonata di Paolo Spriano all'autore, in cui lo storico del pci ha raccontato la grande angoscia che gli ha causato *Quale storia laggiù attende la fine?*, cioè il mondo cancellato un po' per volta lungo la Prospettiva di una città sovietica').

chandeliers, and waltzes—is presented with such appreciation that even the blank paper and abyss seem unable to prevent the narrator from recreating on that paper a world nearer to his heart's desire.

The authorial voice seems most evident in the frequent humorous situations.¹⁹ The characters rarely see anything funny, but because we do, we sense the laughing ghost-voice. Someone familiar with statuettes of the Great Goddess holding two serpents will absorb a dose of authorial power when Irina is described in that pose holding the straining members of her two lovers.

In addition to illustrating the delights of identifying with authorial powers, 'What story down there awaits its end?' also makes us conscious of a new element in Calvino's metaphysics, or rather a new image: that of the bridge over the void. Bridging the void is what several incipits claim to do. In 'Without fear of wind or vertigo', the protagonist-narrator states that

Perhaps it is this story that is a bridge over the void, and as it advances it flings forward news and sensations and emotions to create a ground of upsets both collective and individual in the midst of which a path can be opened while we remain in the dark about many circumstances both historical and geographical. I clear my path through the wealth of details that cover the void I do not want to notice . . . (pp. 82–3)

Forse è questo racconto che è un ponte sul vuoto, e procede buttando avanti notizie e sensazioni e emozioni per creare uno sfondo di rivolgimenti sia collettivi che individuali in mezzo al quale ci si possa aprire un cammino pur restando all'oscuro di molte circostanze sia storiche che geografiche. Mi faccio largo nella profusione di dettagli che coprono il vuoto di cui non voglio accorgermi . . . (p. 82)

Later, the voice will remark that 'The story must also work hard to keep up with us, to report a dialogue constructed on the void, speech by speech. For the story, the bridge is not finished: beneath every word there is nothingness' (p. 83) ('Anche il racconto deve sforzarsi di tenerci dietro, di riferire un dialogo costruito sul vuoto, battuta per battuta. Per il racconto il ponte non è finito: sotto ogni parola c'è il nulla' (p. 83)).

The void is so consistently brought to the fore in these stories that strategies for bridging it take on special significance. The void is not just the emptiness of the universe in which God is dead, but also the gap between reader and author. The authorial voice bridging that gap, making us want to read, offers us an analogy to the bridging of the philosophical gap. By creating such bridges, the power of the author becomes something we relish, oddly enough because it can control and trick us, can force us in unexpected or even unwanted directions. Its

¹⁹ Indeed, Calvino's humour concerning this book spills over into his Oulipian presentation, 'Comment j'ai écrit un de mes livres'—a deadpan parody of A. J. Greimas's semiotic square; Greimas (1987) contributes an equally deadpan introduction to Calvino's nonsense.

effects on us guarantee that it is a real, extant power, whatever we may say about its theoretical limits. In his interview with Francine du Plessix Gray (1981), Calvino himself described his exercise of this power as 'sado-erotic':

In this new novel I may be a more sadistic lover than ever. I constantly play cat and mouse with the reader, letting the reader briefly enjoy the illusion that he's free for a little while, that he's in control. And then I quickly take the rug out from under him. (p. 23)

Power used against us as readers proves itself strong by its success. Then when the author uses it for us, to build bridges, we have more reason to trust its strength and believe in its efficacy.

Reading thus gives a sensation of meaning by engaging us in conversation with other people, by paralleling certain sexual relationships, by letting us feel in communication with an authorial voice, and by engaging our enjoyment of the author's power over us and over the void. In addition to the pleasures of reading and the desires of readers, Calvino also explores those of writers.²⁰ He felicitously condenses his insight with the Cartesian formulation, 'Io leggo dunque esso scrive' (p. 176)—'I read, therefore it writes' (p. 176). Roland Barthes explores the notion of the impersonal verb, to write. It rains, it writes.²¹ The action happens to an author rather than being performed by him or her.

Descartes reduced himself to his thinking function. Calvino has done that in earlier fiction, especially the cosmicomic stories. 'I read' puts his centre of consciousness within a human and social context. The cogito is no longer defined by differentiation from the material universe. *If on a winter's night a traveler* introduces a human culture, with its networks of meaning, between the two. Reading aligns the consciousness with past minds (voices), with other human endeavours, with other systems of ordering experience—resistance within a police state, revolutionary activities, cafés with waltzes, university seminars. Any individual may find most of these disappointing because the individual's cast of mind will prove incompatible with many. However, the act of relating to these possibilities through reading may at least give a sense of community. Exposure to different attempts to create order encourages the feeling that order may be there somewhere. Calvino makes very clear that he does not like the random and senseless. In the fantasy structures of his mind, they equate with the maze. In 'La sfida al labirinto', he argues that literature may not find the way out of the maze, but it can chart passages and can encourage us to adopt the habit of mind which may help

²⁰ Critics disagree over whether reading or writing is the real focus of the book. Most look to reading, but see Segre, Watson, and Lavagetto (1980) for discussions that stress writing.

²¹ Badley and Green offer the most detailed analyses of Calvino's debt to Roland Barthes in this novel. Badley sees the novel as a challenge and correction to *The Pleasure of the Text*; Barthes's *jouissance* is auto-erotic; Calvino's reading is a social act, an act of intercourse.

us find an exit. Trying is better than sinking into debilitated acceptance. In the activities and passions of incipits and chapters, Calvino charts many possible ways of relating to reality, and encourages us to think in terms of exit rather than acquiescence.

'I read, therefore *it* writes' crystallizes other values as well. The phrase suggests that writers do not choose to become authors, but that external forces channel themselves through writers, rather like Silas Flannery's extraterrestrials threatening to invade his mind and use his novel as a medium for their message. The phrase also suggests that reading and writing are coupled, that by writing one passes on to others the pleasures of reading. Writing becomes a powerful form of engagement, powerful in part because involuntary. One is swept into that activity, and willy-nilly one joins the network of reading and writing activity. The implications of joining a network, of being caught up in an activity, of being a conduit between others, suggest a very different picture of his activities than usually emerges in Calvino's work. The solipsism and acute alienation are transformed, and the obvious sense of belonging to a larger human endeavour may account in part for the sunnier tone of this novel.

Out of the Dark Forest

In both *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *If on a winter's night a traveler* Calvino confronts flux. As we have seen here and in his other works, resistance to forces of engulfment is his primary metaphysical concern. In these two novels, the forms taken by flux are those manifested within the discourses of literature. What do these novels represent in terms of development or change in his metaphysic? Are they an advance over the cosmicomical stories or just variations?

Dante's dark forest or 'selva oscura' is an archetypal Italian image for the labyrinthine threat faced in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. Dante's Christian assumptions, however, render his path inaccessible to Calvino's traveller. Dante gives us answers derived from faith. The traveller tries to make interpretations based on reason plus whatever else we rely on when reading, but fails to persuade us that he has come up with solid solutions.

Another famous figure to face engulfment and survive, however, is Orpheus, and Calvino several times seems to rely on Orpheus's story for images in the tarot tales. The elegant, formal, exalted cards in the 'castle' section represent an Apollonian concept of order. Dionysian flux threatens what they stand for by preventing stable interpretation. Apollo and Dionysus; paranoia and schizophrenia, in the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari. Historically, Orpheus has often been seen as

the mean between Apollo and Dionysus.²² His ascetic rituals seemed Apollonian, but his death at the hands of Bacchantes links him to Dionysus.

Orpheus informs the tarot tales indirectly through two of the four core images associated with the bard. Calvino does nothing with the first and fourth: the musician's power to tame beasts, stones, and trees, and the oracular power of his severed head. We do, though, find echoes of his descent into the underworld and his *sparagmos* or ritual dismemberment at the hands of the maenads.²³

The Castle of Crossed Destinies in a sense comes to us from the underworld; several of the tales imply that their tellers are dead already, or have passed through death in some fashion. Orpheus tries to wrest the object of his desire from death and fails, but that failure does not discredit his creative endeavours, whether these are seen as music or as writing. Dismemberment, particularly by angry women, proves a rich theme for Calvinian variation. One deduces that the embedded fears had personal resonances for him, but more important, they have philosophical or artistic significance as well. Unconsciousness threatens consciousness, and the artist fends off the former by projecting his own voice. Calvino rouses deep anxieties in himself by denying himself an ordinary voice; he mutes speech, and forces his narrator to search beyond the desperate babbling voice to the thought or image units that generate its discourses. Despite his prior engagement with narratological theory and combinatorics, Calvino does not seem to find such generation of story very comforting within the confines of this novel. As a source for story, this 'machine' works very well, but the stories themselves are of violence, madness, and death. Moreover, Calvino is not consoled by his Orphic identity as artist. Ihab Hassan argues that the artist must be rent by violence if he is to speak at all in the repressive Apollonian order, but Calvino seems unwilling to trust that the poet thus dismembered will indeed become a talking head.²⁴ Dissolution and fragmentation merge one with flux, and the result may prove irreversible.

Hence in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Calvino adopts a different persona. I am speaking not of the Reader as narrative focus, but of the authorial presence behind the Reader, the person who wrote or through whom was written the series of ten novel incipits. He is something like the juggler, the 'bagatto' or 'bateleur' of the tarots, or Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur*. He is an entertainer, engaged in a cybernetic relationship of feedback from an audience. He needs that audience, whose existence

²² For Orpheus's religious role and his mediating position between Apollo and Dionysus, see W. K. C. Guthrie and Emmet Robbins.

²³ For discussions of the Orphic tradition in literature, see Elizabeth Sewall and Walter A. Strauss.

²⁴ See Hassan's 'The Dismemberment of Orpheus'.

makes his own more satisfactory and authentic. The Readers provide tension and engagement, standard elements in a sense of meaning. In shifting from anguished forest traveller to 'bagatto' or *bricoleur*, Calvino follows his own dictum in 'Lightness' and lessens the weight inhering in his fantasy structures. The narrator of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* is a traveller with a capital T, an allegorical figure whose Dantesque and Orphic intertexts impose tragic heaviness. The Reader of *If on a winter's night a traveler* is also a traveller, but only a tourist. He invokes less grand traditions, and invites us to enjoy ourselves.

If on a winter's night a traveler also exhibits vastly less anxiety than the earlier text. The fear of women, for instance, seems considerably reduced.²⁵ This book really is more concerned with the faces of desire than with fear.²⁶ Women appear in many roles from lover to Goddess, but their inherent threat has been subsumed by bureaucracy, by the shadowy 'Them' celebrated by writers like Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer, and William Burroughs. Irina may hold Valerian and Alex in sexual thrall, but the death warrant stems from a revolutionary tribunal, not from Irina. Stereotypes remain: Ludmilla is the passive and receptive vessel for masculine writing, and Lotaria, as feminist critic, is rendered dislikeable, but even this somewhat threatening figure offers more danger to literature than to the Reader.

Calvino thus both approaches and shies away from engagement with society. Reading as social act lets him explore personal relationships, but bureaucracy remains a threat as enforcer of inauthenticity and irritation, and he (and the Reader) try to escape such bureaucratic structures. In Calvino's explorations of science as the meaning-giving structure, he had ignored the placement of cogito within society by virtually abolishing society. That alienation continued to a lesser degree in later books. Marco Polo and the Khan, engaged in a mostly imagined dialogue, do not constitute a society; neither do tarot cards or voiceless

²⁵ To finish the Ludovica Ripa di Meana interview (actually an 'autocolloquio'), Calvino felt called upon to react to comments on his images of dismemberment at the hands of women, especially in 'The Surviving Warrior's Tale'. He answers his own question as follows: 'That story is a sort of masculine incubus when faced with the female revolution. The truth is that in my life, I have met women of great strength. I could not live without a woman at my side. I am only one piece of a two-headed and two-sexed being, which is the true biological and thinking organism' ('Quel racconto è una specie di incubo maschile di fronte alla rivoluzione femminile. Vero è che nella mia vita ho incontrato donne di grande forza. Non potrei vivere senza una donna al mio fianco. Sono solo un pezzo d'un essere bicefalo e bisessuato, che è il vero organismo biologico e pensante').

²⁶ No one critic has encompassed all the many forms of desire explored in this novel. Mary McCarthy felicitously draws our attention to the suffused eroticism of the whole. Malmgren delineates the erotics of reading. Bencivenga concludes that 'it is the story of a desire: the desire to write a story and to read it, the desire to tell and to be told, to explain and to get an explanation' (1986: 14). MacShane says that the 'real theme' of the novel is the complexity of human love, and he is bothered by Calvino's refusal to develop the ramifications and links it to Calvino's refusal to develop endings for the incipits.

travellers. Significantly, in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Calvino's protagonist regains a place within a social network or web, and that web clearly operates as a safety net stretched between ourselves and the abyss. Whereas the societies featured in the early fantasies were mostly aristocratic—protagonists were viscount, baron, and paladin, for instance—here the relationships are relatively egalitarian, as the term 'network' implies. In important ways, Calvino will never again reach so affirmative a stance on meaningful relations with other people. Palomar, though engaged in a complex relationship with his wife, withdraws from other people. At least Calvino explored the possibilities of society this one time in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. The social aspect of reading proved at best a temporary means of fitting in, but the mental benefits from reading do continue. As I shall argue later, they contribute to his concept of inner civilization, and are perhaps its chief source.

Observing the Invisible: *Invisible Cities and Mr. Palomar*

'All this is happening not on the sea, not in the sun', the swimmer Palomar thinks, 'but inside my head, in the circuits between eyes and brain. I am swimming in my mind; this sword of light exists only there; and this is precisely what attracts me. This is my element, the only one I can know in some way.'

(*Mr. Palomar*, 15)

Tutto questo avviene non sul mare, non nel sole,—pensa il nuotatore Palomar,—ma dentro la mia testa, nei circuiti tra gli occhi e il cervello. Sto nuotando nella mia mente; è solo là che esiste questa spada di luce; e ciò che mi attira è proprio questo. È questo il mio elemento, l'unico che io possa in qualche modo conoscere.

(*Palomar*, 16–17)

All that Palomar ever experiences takes place in his mind; indeed, the phenomena of the universe somehow depend upon his seeing them, or at least upon the speculative eye of somebody seeing them, for that blade of sun does not exist without a point of view. In *Invisible Cities* and *Mr. Palomar* Calvino explores the observations of the eye and the interiority of experience, unusually intellectual subject matter for novels.¹

Few writers of fiction deny themselves as much as Calvino does; in this impulse he is as ascetic as any Desert Father. Love stories are out. He does not permit himself violence or explicit sex, and indulges in very little inexplicit sex. Politics, family struggles, history: they are potentially too intriguing. We would lose track of what matters to his cogito in the emotional net they can cast. In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, Calvino denies the faculty of speech to his characters. In *If on a winter's night a traveler*, he refuses to finish stories and thereby give readers the sense of gratification that comes from closure. Suspense and other easy, narrative-controlled anxieties are scorned. Calvino eliminates or at least reduces any element that would nurture identification with the protagonists, and satisfaction at successful outcomes.

In *Invisible Cities* and *Mr. Palomar* he finds yet new ways to pare

¹ John Hannay views such observation not just as scientific interest in phenomena, but as Calvino's exploring the narrative potential of the objects observed.

down traditional attractions of literature. These two novels are his most cerebral works, and in the case of *Mr. Palomar*, his most philosophical.² *Invisible Cities* turns out not to be the travelogues of one middle-aged man reporting to another—cerebral enough by most gauges—but rather the occasional words, the silent interpretations of emblems, and even the Khan's re-creations of what Polo might have said had Polo spoken. What we read is almost entirely the inner workings of one or of two minds, and 'exchanges' are sometimes completely imaginary and wordless.

Mr. Palomar describes the activities of Palomar's mind when confronted with phenomena from everyday life. This intimacy with a mind—new for Calvino—is partly cancelled by his refusal to cast this experiment in the first-person singular. He might have done so; some of his essays in *Collezione di sabbia* are Palomarian discourses delivered in the first person. In refusing to invite identification with a point of view, Calvino chooses to forgo one more easy claim on the reader. Palomar remains distanced, and the intimate detail is entirely the result of intense scrutiny, not empathy or lyrical impulse.

In other words, these two novels focus on the eye and on mental responses to the act of observation while eliminating distractions of the sort offered by conventional plots. *Mr. Palomar* in many ways returns to the pristine confrontation of consciousness with cosmos seen in the cosmicomic stories, but forgoes the explosive novelty of viewing the Big Bang and the first light.³ Instead, Palomar looks at weeds in his lawn, at giraffes in a zoo, at the westering sun agleam on the ocean, all more or less the material of very ordinary lives, available to any reader.

What Calvino sacrifices in ornamentation and in conventional engagement between reader and text he makes up for with a strange intensity, with a kind of purity and focus and simplicity which shock us because we are unused to experiencing them. Together, these two novels explore Calvino's basic dialectic between eye or I and cosmic flux, as well as the schemes for ordering that flux which the mind generates. As part of his ongoing exploration of this subject, they offer few surprises, but in so far as all of his books break new ground, these two come up with a major new means of linking self to cosmos that shows itself in the new images of mirror, model, and matrix.

Other chapters have dealt with texts one after another. In this one,

² Philippe Daros (1988) links Palomar's modelling activities to the grand dream that stretches from Cartesianism to cybernetics: understanding of the world through model or metaphor. Celati (1987: 236) also links Palomar to Descartes, as exploring the Cartesian belief that 'nothing is so multiple or dispersed that it cannot be circumscribed within precise limits by means of enumeration and thus be arranged for our comprehension'. Cannon (1985) links Palomar's techniques of defamiliarization to phenomenology.

³ Guj (1988) sees Palomar as Qfwfq grown up, and Simonetta Noé sees him as Qfwfq postmodernized; Qfwfq is the man of the 'gay science', Palomar is post-scientific man (Noé, 1985: 74). Horace Engdahl traces the descent of Palomar instead to Marcovaldo (within Calvino's works) and to Bouvard and Pecuchet outside. To Flaubert's pair, Arne Melberg adds Don Quixote as fairly immediate ancestor.

I would like to explore the two novels simultaneously. The first part will show what Calvino does with cogito and flux. The second part will demonstrate more particularly what these texts offer by way of changes and developments in his metaphysic, for despite the stability of his core concerns, Calvino never fails to find new approaches to his basic problem.

One new development will be the attack on language; as part of his pruning away of presuppositions, Calvino forces himself to probe the limitations of language, and to give up previous assumptions of its adequacy. Several times he pushes towards situations in which intellection takes place without language, thus taking his fictions beyond known horizons.

In addition to serious doubts about language, Calvino also displays new attitudes toward mental interiors. This is not to say that he delves into psychology, but he does pay more attention to the individual mind and to the elements of consciousness that go into making a self. In the dissection of Palomar's mind—its three egos, for instance—Calvino does appear to come as close as he ever gets to sensitive personal information, to authorial vulnerability. *Mr. Palomar* stands out as highly original among his works in regard to such revelation, the more so as his posthumous works mostly reflect withdrawal and the creation of new screens to prevent such revelation.

Once we see what Calvino does with language and mind, we can note further developments in his quest for ways of creating meaning. Mirror-structures provide him with a means of bridging the gap between mind and matter. Perhaps because of their extremely pared-down subjects, these two novels seem to me to come as close as any of Calvino's works to suggesting his working answers to his questions.

Organizing the Empires of the Mind

'Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions' (*Invisible Cities*, 5) ('Non è detto che Kublai Kan creda a tutto quel che dice Marco Polo quando gli descrive le città visitate nelle sue ambascerie' (*Le città invisibili*, 13)). What a wonderfully disturbing opening line. As we plunge into *Invisible Cities* and respond to such exotic odours as elephants after rain and the scent of sandalwood ashes, we might suppose that Calvino was breaking with his own past and quest. Not so. The empire itself is the new avatar of flux, and new devices for ordering this 'endless, formless ruin' are proposed by both Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in their mental minuet of hypotheses, proposals, dryly petulant queries, oblique responses, sybilline utterances, and philosophical conundrums.

In fact, one way of reading *Invisible Cities* is as an obsessive array of

minimal units being used to make sense of flux. The most obvious of such sets are the cities themselves. The original Marco Polo classified cities first by religion, then by political affiliation, and then by such individual qualities as commercially interesting products. Calvino ignores the first two, and also pays no attention to regions, language groups, or history. Instead, he gives us these living units involving culture, trade, and architecture. Calvino even provides the units with generic names and numbers: 'Continuous cities 3'.

What with the numbers and the elaborately patterned presentation, Calvino at first seems to be offering us an exceptionally orderly world.⁴ As James (1982) has cogently argued, however (and most others agree), seriality embodies no values of beauty or taste; it is post-humanist and denies the network of cause and effect upon which our normal sense of order depends. Furthermore, as Baker puts it (1975: 261), 'The precision of structure set down in the index is itself a concise comment on the contradictory nature of any attempt to give meaning to the labyrinth of reality.' The arrangement proves arbitrary, and the sequence ends because Calvino chooses not to continue, not through any organic or logical limitation. 'Cities and eyes' cannot always be distinguished from 'Cities and names'; so too some Continuous cities might exchange titles with some Hidden cities without causing any reader discomfort. The overt orderliness is deceptive.

When we move from the level of overt structure to the texture of individual descriptions, we again find a system of minimal units. Most of the cities are presented through thumb-nail sketches such as might appear in a Baedeker: so many towers or canals, such-and-such a colour predominating, this sociological pattern, that oddity which would make the city stand out in the tourist's mind.⁵ These lists would seem like dream-renditions of the Blue Guide descriptions that Roland Barthes attacks in *Mythologies* were it not for the improbabilities with which Calvino undermines the travelogue formula. Zenobia is a city built on pilings, though no water justifies this architecture; in Hypatia, crabs bite the eyes of suicides in the Magnolia Garden's blue lagoons; of Armilla, nothing exists but the water-pipes and plumbing fixtures. We sense the

⁴ For analyses of the geometries as meaningful, see the two- and three-dimensional renditions in Frasson-Marin (1977); see Lavagetto (1973) for a competing geometrical mapping. Ferraro argues, with diagrams, that the pattern followed is a labyrinth, and Calvino's going through it is his accepting his own 'sfida al labirinto'. Marelli likens the expansion and then contraction of the overall pattern to a diachronic portrait of the universe. Ravazzoli (1987) argues that there are only three types of city: binary, plural, and a combination in which a binarism is repeated (the just city inside the unjust inside the just, and so forth).

⁵ Calvino's interest in cities is long-standing. See Cannon (1978) and Martin Paul Sommer. Because of this focus on cities, Jeannot (1977) links this novel most closely to *The Watcher*, where Cottolengo becomes The City. The cities' extravagant beauty has also provoked many references to Calvino's utopian strain; see Christensen for the most detailed analysis of this aspect of the novel.

drive to organize flux through agreed-upon units, but find that the ordering devices make no sense.

At the level of each individual city, Calvino tries a different kind of minimal unit. These may consist of human roles exchanged through a kind of lottery and transfer; or they may consist of cities within cities, happy within unhappy, unjust within just.

At the semantic level, Calvino touches lightly on his old friends, 'pulviscolo' and 'sabbia', the ultimate material units at the visible level of reality. The empire is like '*a desert of labile and interchangeable data, like grains of sand*' (p. 22) ('*un deserto di dati labili e intercambiabili come grani di sabbia*' (p. 30)). The souls of the unborn of Laudomia appear like motes of dust. The history of this city's inhabitants emblemizes itself as an hourglass, each person's life a grain of sand passing through the bottle's neck. Thus we find different types of basic unit operating at each level of organization.

Calvino's fascination with taxonomically rigid structures also informs *Mr. Palomar*, where we find twenty-seven narratives, numbered from 1.1.1 to 3.3.3. Again, the orderliness is superficial; the basic range of concerns—vacation, city, and silences—is arbitrary. The sub-groups represent encounters with nature, cultural experiences, and cerebration, but clearly Calvino might have chosen many other possible foci, including Palomar's encounters with other people, as he himself points out. Whereas some of the many Calvinian struggles with flux take place in tragic or ironic modes, those in *Mr. Palomar* are high intellectual comedy, or so I would argue.⁶ We see Palomar try to tame flux with hilarious results in 'The infinite lawn', for example. After distinguishing legitimate plants from weeds, Palomar moves on to how one might count blades and how one understands a lawn conceptually by means of set theory, to how one might apply these mental exercises to the universe:

Mr. Palomar's mind has wandered, he has stopped pulling up weeds. He no longer thinks of the lawn: he thinks of the universe. He is trying to apply to the universe everything he has thought about the lawn. The universe as regular and ordered cosmos or as chaotic proliferation. The universe perhaps finite but countless, unstable within its borders, which discloses other universes within

⁶ The comedic element for both these novels depends heavily on the reader's perspective. For *Mr. Palomar*, critics stressing comedy include Söderblom and Engdahl; those feeling more distress include Schulz-Buschhaus (1987), who sees tragic loss of faith in the individual, in illusions of critical distance and in our control of history; Ricci (1984) sees misanthropic intellection and despair; Guj (1987, 1988) believes that Palomar ends in the 'dark forest' from which Dante was saved; and Testa sees this narrative as adding up to the 'wisdom of nothingness'. Likewise for *Invisible Cities*, some readers respond to its beauties and perfections, but several critics find it depressing. Mengaldo sees a discouraging withdrawal of psychic energy from community values; Schneider (1989) sees castration fantasies with the Inferno as termination point; Gabellone sees both works as exposures to the 'infinito cattivo'; Carter sees the desires leading to death.

itself. The universe, collection of celestial bodies, nebulae, fine dust, force fields, intersections of fields, collections of collections. (p. 33)

Palomar s'è distratto, non strappa più le erbacce, non pensa più al prato: pensa all'universo. Sta provando ad applicare all'universo tutto quello che ha pensato del prato. L'universo come cosmo regolare e ordinato o come proliferazione caotica. L'universo forse finito ma innumerabile, instabile nei suoi confini, che apre entro di sé altri universi. L'universo, insieme di corpi celesti, nebulose, pulviscolo, campi di forze, intersezioni di campi, insiemi di insiemi. (p. 34)

Thus from near-sighted consideration of single dandelions, Palomar's mind strays to the cosmos and several of the limited systems we use to make it seem assimilable and orderly—and meanwhile, his gardening is forgotten.

In other narratives, Palomar focuses upon other basic pieces—individual starlings amidst the migratory hordes, unusual cheeses within a large display—and of course he notices sand in the Japanese gravel garden and in 'the dust cloud [pulviscolo] of present or possible events' (p. 118). These are the sorts of minimal bits that Palomar deals with. Kublai Khan shares this drive to relate the individual to the general, in his case, cities to empire.⁷ Practised though he may be at this mental game, he falls considerably short of Palomar in his ability to move from micro- to macroscopic designs. Anything—even blades of grass—can invoke the entire universe for Palomar.

Palomar is also more troubled by the inadequacy of his systems. Kublai Khan is emperor and his life holds together through traditions and ritual if nothing else; Palomar has no such settled frame to fall back on. In those terms, the terror of chaos is more real for Palomar and he has more to lose. Seamus Heaney felicitously puts this point speaking of Calvino, but what he says is relevant to Palomar as well:

Mr Calvino is on the high wires, on lines of thought strung out above the big international circus. . . . What is most impressive about 'Mr. Palomar' is a sense of the safety-net being withdrawn at the end, of beautiful, nimble, solitary feats of imagination being carried off not so much to dazzle an audience as to outface what the poet Philip Larkin calls 'the solving emptiness I That lies just under all we do'. (1985: 60)

In technical, narrative terms, the repeated risks are Calvino's; teetering on the brink of the void, however, constitutes the minimal unit of Palomar's experience, and he too is impressive for his ability to continue the quest despite all his negative conclusions.

⁷ Critics who focus on the interplay of unique city versus empire include De Lauretis (1978), who notes a differentiation between the early mercantile outlook of Marco Polo and that of later capitalist vision; James (1986); Cannon (1981), who notes the parallels of empire and universe; and Breiner, who sees the invisible tracery as global economics, and notes that the mercantile outlook is additive (products will become available everywhere by exchange) while that of empire is aimed at uniformity.

We have seen enough of minimal units now to see how these two novels bear the 'accento inconfondibile' of Calvino. When we turn to the avatars of flux, we find both familiar and new shapes. In *Invisible Cities*, the commonest representation of paste or of ungovernable multiplicity takes the form of the labyrinth or set of forking paths, the endless and uncontrollable generation of possibilities. The speaker who approached Dorothea tells of caravan routes and of lives that opened to him, only one of which he could take; the roads not taken nudge at his consciousness. Similarly, Marco Polo imagines his travels—or is thought by the Khan to imagine them—as branching futures, while the paths not taken are dead branches of the past. The models of Fedora are branches of an intellectual path, possible futures rendered impossible by the course of development actually taken. The Khan muses that all the cities may be tending toward dystopias or even inferno. Polo tells him how to face inferno with words that might be borrowed from 'La sfida al labirinto'. Inferno is like a labyrinth in that we can either accept it, or look for flaws in its imprisoning plan, little spaces of non-inferno. Like Calvino the essayist, Marco Polo recommends continued search for the non-infernal.

The labyrinth is familiar, but Calvino gives it a new face by crossing it with the vortex when he regales us with Marco Polo's fantasia upon the two chess squares, which prove to be the intersection of an indefinite number of fields of knowledge: ecology, botany, entomology, economics, trade, craftsmanship in woodcarving, and more. Thanks to the richness of Calvino's imagination, we cannot exhaust even a minimalist emblem of reality. Chess squares prove as divisible as the supposedly indivisible atom. Symbolically, one black and one white square seem to epitomize the whole concept of minimal units, yet when subjected to the visionary lens of Calvino's mind, they suck us into multitudinous, burgeoning worlds.

In *Mr. Palomar*, such new faces for old images become the norm. He gives us a wonderful rendition of ocean as the ultimate indivisible mass when Palomar tries to isolate and measure a single wave. Evolution and genetic possibility represent another flux; the scaly denizens of the reptile house represent combinations of features which chanced to become fixed and able to resist the flux that threatens to undo and recast them. Cheeses become a mental maze; the meat at the butcher's, like chess squares, becomes the intersection of fields of knowledge, and hence a maze of sorts. The instability of visible units emerges in Palomar's disquisition on Mexican archaeology: animals stand for gods which stand for stars which stand for human qualities, and on and on. The dizzying vortex tugs at Palomar's mind when he watches the flock of starlings. At first he is comforted; the individual birds move as one, forming a single, harmonious, purposeful body.

But he has only to start following a single bird with his gaze and the disassociation of the elements returns; and the current that he felt transporting him, the network that he felt sustaining him, dissolve; the effect is that of a vertigo that grips him at the pit of the stomach. (p. 63)

Ma basta che egli si metta a seguire con lo sguardo un singolo pennuto perché la dissociazione degli elementi riprenda il sopravvento ed ecco che la corrente da cui si sentiva trasportato, la rete da cui si sentiva sostenuto si dissolvono e l'effetto è quello d'una vertigine che lo prende alla bocca dello stomaco. (p. 65)

And of course *Mr. Palomar* gamely renders the final dissolution into flux-as-death, first experienced intellectually by projection, then in actuality.

Sights as well as things normally unseen though present are the starting point for these two works. Granting the material to be different from the literary concerns of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *If on a winter's night a traveler*, we can none the less recognize kinship among the structural fantasies underlying all of these post-cosmical works. This is not to say that Calvino just treads the same path. He explores several new images, one for flux, the others for the means of controlling it and making sense of it.

The new vision of flux is not just psychologically distressing; it is contagiously ugly. Junk, detritus, and rubbish: these pile up and stubbornly refuse to rot away. They occupy more and more of the space available, and threaten to overwhelm our culture and its activities.

Disharmonizing one of Palomar's most epiphanic meditations, 'The sword of the sun', is the flotsam on the water-line, including 'cans, peanuts, condoms, dead fish, plastic bottles, broken clogs, syringes, twigs black with oil' (p. 17) ('barattoli, noccioli, preservativi, pesci morti, bottiglie di plastica, zoccoli rotti, siringhe, rami neri di morchia' (p. 19)). Because lists have been so closely linked to mazes, to the breakdown of system when confronted with the variety of experience, this list of disgusting objects parallels Calvino's rhetoric elsewhere, but introduces distinctly new subject matter, the like of which is only found in *Invisible Cities*.

Indeed *Invisible Cities* devotes section VII to variations on the theme of junk. In the introductory italics, Kublai Khan suggests that he and Marco Polo may just be two beggars sifting through a junk heap who, drunk on a few sips of cheap wine, think themselves apprised of all the glories of the East. Polo caps this by suggesting that maybe the whole world is covered with rubbish heaps and the Khan's gardens are just a dream. In the five cities, we see cultures in one way or another devoted to their own trash. Behind the gleaming face of Moriana is an obverse—rotted, rusting, blackened, faded, and broken. The city has no substance, just two faces, like two sides of a sheet of paper. Clarice is the site of

several successive civilizations, high and low. What were once commonplace objects have attained the exalted state of collectables. Bits and pieces of the original culture are now preserved in display cases, and Clarice's current civilization is a *bricolage* or mosaic of effects, perhaps a bit like the mosaic created by Wha in 'I meteoriti'. Eusapia is devoted to its own mortuary rubbish, the preserved bodies of the dead and their vain day-dreams of glory. Beersheba lives with two self-images, one heavenly and one infernal. The latter is imagined to be made up of everything ugly and undesirable from Beersheba itself: the contents of garbage containers, including discarded spaghetti, old bandages, and the contents of sewers. The city puts its efforts into trash and sewage disposal, and cleanses itself with anal compulsiveness: 'Only when it shits, is [the city] not miserly, calculating, greedy' (p. 113)^a ('Solo quando caca non è avara calcolatrice interessata' (p. 118)). Likewise the city of Leonia compulsively expels its rubbish. As the rubbish improves in quality, however, it resists decay and piles up. The narrative voice wonders if the entire world consists of cities like Leonia surrounded by craters of rubbish; these cities are envisioned as volcanoes erupting garbage. Clearly the flux of junk is not just an ecological concern; Calvino invests it with apocalyptic energy and scope. It constitutes yet one more form of chaos that may overwhelm us.

When we turn from images of flux to those representing systems of control, we find two that Calvino has tried before, but which he tests again under different circumstances. These two are the bridge and the network. We find both combined in Octavia, which resembles a spider's web hanging over a precipice between two mountains. Other networks are found in Ersilia, where inhabitants stretch colour-coded strings from place to place, marking out lines of blood, commerce, and power relationships. In Esmeralda, the network consists of canals, and the inhabitants' routes may be liquid or solid. In all these cities, the adequacy of such networks is genially undercut. The spider's-web city, we are ominously warned, cannot last for ever. The colour-coded strings eventually choke off all movement, and citizens must move to a new site and start afresh. The liquid and solid human routes of Esmeralda are declared inferior to the aerial routes of the swallows that swoop and dive among city pinnacles.

The image of the bridge also appears in *If on a winter's night a*

^a 'Cacare' may not have quite the nasty strength of 'to shit' in English, but it is a strong word for Calvino to use, given his decorous vocabulary; the throw-away mentality that contributes to our world of rising junk was obviously very distasteful to him, as we see in 'Le figlie della Luna'. However, in 'La poubelle agréée' he explores rubbish as part of contemporary life. He pursues his usual meditative pattern of following one forking path after another of associations and implications, until his putting out the rubbish is linked to international and municipal politics, to ecology, to ritual and purification, and even to a religion of Good Works and Grace.

traveler. Its presence signals a problem in Calvino's metaphysics: how does one get from one level of reality to another, or from pattern in the cosmos to pattern in individual life? The bridges are metaphors for the linkage demanded by his metaphysic, and sometimes suggest solutions. Story itself is the bridge in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Communication serves the same bridging function in *Mr. Palomar*:

the discrepancy between human behavior and the rest of the universe has always been a source of anguish. The equal whistle of man and blackbird now seems to him a bridge thrown over the abyss. (p. 27)

la discrepanza tra il comportamento umano e il resto dell'universo è sempre stata fonte d'angoscia. Il fischio uguale dell'uomo e del merlo ecco gli appare come un ponte gettato sull'abisso. (p. 29)

He ponders possible spans between nature and culture, silence and speech. Similarly, in 'The model of models' 'he confined himself to imagining a right use of the right models to bridge the gap that he saw yawning, ever wider, between reality and principles' (p. 110) ('egli si limitava a immaginare un giusto uso di giusti modelli per colmare l'abisso che vedeva spalancarsi sempre di più tra la realtà e i principi' (p. 112)). Clearly for Palomar, the void is not a single abyss but rather a condition of open, bottomless division that exists just underneath any relationship or mental schema. Like flux, it yawns threateningly, but whereas flux may dissolve consciousness without necessarily destroying all continuity, the void appears to represent the absence of life and existence of any sort. The two threats are closely related, but Palomar faces the void more frequently than Qfwfq ever did. Qfwfq's dissolutions may lead to metamorphosis—'L'implosione' offers a vivid example—but Palomar expects no such continuation of self.

More interesting because it constitutes a new departure is Calvino's attempt to develop another framework for dealing with flux and its minimal units, and for dealing with establishing relationships between systems of order. He approaches the problem by creating some kind of double or complement, or reflection of it, a mirror or model, or matrix. Of necessity, these are simplifications; they let the Khan and Polo and Palomar deal with scaled down versions of the grand problem, and permit them to form theories to be tested. These new imaginative constructs establish relationships based upon analogy or congruence, and such formal likeness constitutes the philosophical bridge between the two systems.

The concept of the matrix or negative space surrounding an object has appealed to Calvino once or twice before. Empty spaces in the interstices of systems intrigue him in 'Le fiamme in fiamme' and 'Il mihrab'. The latter essay in particular shows spaces proving more meaningful than the contrasting structure. 'La memoria del mondo' presents the matrix of an

information system: whatever is omitted by the meaning system—sneezes and scratching an itch, for instance—can become the basis for a different, complementary or competing meaning system. When the Khan and Polo first start their conferences, the Khan is drawn by emblems and information, but even more by 'the space that remained around [every piece of news], a void not filled with words' (p. 38) ('lo spazio che restava loro intorno, un vuoto non riempito di parole' (p. 45)). As we shall see later, Calvino seriously wonders if words prevent communication, so the possibility of communicating by means of empty spaces and silences attracts him.⁹ Later, when the Khan proposes a model city based on norms from which all possible cities can be deduced, Polo counters with one based on exceptions, exclusions, contradictions, and incongruities, a matrix or complement to the Khan's norms. The matrix turns up as space and measured distance between two solid points in Zaira. The city itself is not what matters, but the heights and distances central to events of the past: the height between the dangling feet of a hanged usurper and the ground; the range of a gunboat whose shell did damage. What one finds in the empty spaces is the diachronic past embedded in the synchronic present, invisible except to the viewer who knows the locations and dimensions. Palomar explores such a matrix in his disquisition upon biting the tongue; silence becomes a kind of speech, a comment on what has been said and what, if anything, might meaningfully be said in answer.

Models, as alternatives to matrices, appear in *Invisible Cities* and take several forms. In Fedora collected crystal balls each show a different possible version of Fedora. All five of the 'Cities and the sky' show cities mapped or modelled elsewhere, be it in the stars or in a carpet pattern or in the city's own projections of itself. The Khan's chessplaying is a modelling-game. Models are practically the organizing motif of *Mr. Palomar*. The models help Palomar make sense of some aspect of reality or experience; they are metaphors for explaining strangeness. Palomar likens objects of scrutiny to computers or mechanisms; he uses set theory, semiotics, structuralism; he wrestles with star maps when viewing sidereal bodies; he explores the pigeon's-eye view as a model for the human. Ultimately he muses upon his own model-making obsession and charts his many changes of attitude toward such models.

'Reading a wave' illustrates Palomar's modelling activities. To understand a single wave in its entirety might prove the key to the universe, he thinks; he could control the complexity of the world by reducing it to the simplest sort of mechanism, and success in this endeavour might ward off the heart attack and ulcer that his nervous irritability lay him open to. We see Palomar's conviction that he cannot master complexity

⁹ See Carlino for more discussion of Calvino's explorations of discourses and matrix silences.

until he understands the fundamental units, here wave motion, indeed a fundamental principle of concern at all levels of the physical cosmos. Regrettably, the waves refuse to be tamed to the limits of his human sight and imagination. His attempt to construct a model fails.

Likewise, the semiotics of human conversation provides a possible model for blackbirds' calls. People say something, but signal something quite different with the utterance. Mrs Palomar's remarking on the degree to which the garden has dried out in just one day serves several aims. By changing the subject and speaking in a normal tone, she claims more nonchalance regarding the birds than Palomar; because of its triviality, her remark allows Palomar to assume that there are no crises, and he may remain sitting and thinking; she may also, Palomar notes, be hinting that he might do more garden chores, such as watering. Palomar muses on such complexities as models for avian communication.

In 'The model of models' Palomar notes three stages of thought regarding models. In the first he valued structures exhibiting logic, geometry, and harmony. Not surprisingly, he found that whenever his eye abandoned his harmonious patterns, what he saw of human life was monstrous and disastrous, the patterns all twisted. So he abandoned this initial quest in favour of one that relied on a great number of models whose characteristics might be drawn on to fit the many faces of a multiple reality. This seems to be the stage applicable to much of *Mr. Palomar* itself, and even to *Invisible Cities*. In each italicized exchange in the latter, the two protagonists try different hypotheses about empire and reality. Each hypothesis works for some part of the total picture, but not for the whole.

Then distrust of models sets in, partly because political models are instruments of power wielded without regard to consequences. From the politicians' point of view, the ideal system is invulnerable and eternal, so Palomar finds himself drawn toward diaphanous models, and ultimately he tries to eradicate all models from his mind. To this third stage, presumably, belong such sceptical explorations as 'Serpents and skulls' and 'On biting the tongue'. In this state of suspended judgement, he must avoid bringing his thoughts together in general statements, lest the result be a model. Instead, he tries simply to meet situations one by one, each on its own terms, with no prepared answers.

Calvino does not create as many mirrors as he does matrices and models, but mirrors do constitute one final variation among the new images that he develops in these books. Both mirrors and models involve an imitation or similarity, but where the model reflects hidden rules of coherence, a mirror copies surface resemblances. The two are not entirely separable in *Invisible Cities*. Valdrada most clearly embodies the mirror-principle. It is built above a lake, and everything that happens in the city is mirrored in that liquid image. However, even actions carried

out in secret appear in the mirror, and the mirror plays the same tricks that history does, sometimes increasing and sometimes decreasing the value of particular actions. Several cities devoted to the dead reflect the living city, though not exactly. Eusapia's dead double permits the corpses to assume roles they think they might have preferred in real life, so in addition to those reasonably content with their lot, there are big-game hunters, singers, virtuosi, aristocrats, military officers, and others of privileged positions. The concentric replications of Olinda may remind one of a hall of mirrors or a *mise en abyme*.¹⁰ Though less prominent in *Mr. Palomar*, Palomar's most important confrontation, that with himself, takes place in a passage entitled 'The universe as mirror'.

Clearly Calvino's fantasy images have developed in new directions with these texts. The images of bridging and the practices of modelling and mirroring all show his attempting to solve a problem in the metaphysic, one that prevents humans from deriving meaning from patterns seen in other planes of reality. Bridging structures between authorial voice and reader help solidify this relationship that spans a void; bridging structures between a microcosmic emblem and a macrocosm help invest that resemblance with meaning.

The Inward Turn of Narrative

Aurore Frasson-Marin notes that true voyagers find nothing but themselves (1977:28). She takes this concept from Baudelaire, but offers it as comment on *Invisible Cities*. Certainly we can agree that Calvino is not giving us a lesson in Chinese geography or depicting Chinese metropolises. Indeed, he is showing us *invisible* cities, his novel forming a magic atlas like the Khan's own. But if the ostensible subject is not the 'real' world of China, need it be the self? And if it is the self, how and in what sense? Do the cities reflect the self? Do the two protagonists? And whose self do they reflect? Several critics, among them Bernardini Napoletano, Mengaldo, and Ravazzoli (1978), see the two spokesmen as projections of a single mind or fragments of a single personality presumably akin to or identical with Calvino's own. If we are to read the novel as allegory, how do the pieces fit together?

Mr. Palomar is much more obviously concerned with a self, even to some degree with Calvino's own self, so much so that Ricci (1984) and Noé (1985) refer to the protagonist as Calvino-Palomar. And yet, the series of meditations are not first-person singular, and they avoid demonstrably autobiographical details: Palomar is not named Calvino, and we are not told that he is a writer who works for a publisher, for instance. Yes, the house near the sea and the flat in Rome appear to be Calvino's own,

¹⁰ For more on mirrors of the self, see James (1986).

and many details confirm kinship. Palomar's three egos seem to be fragments of Calvino too, their activities well attested to by attitudes and expressions in his fiction and interviews. However, Palomar shows no sense of humour and Calvino, by describing Palomar, definitely does, so we should be slow to treat the two as indistinguishable.

I suggest that these two novels might best be likened to space probes, satellites crossing the airless expanses between the everyday world of the visible and the Venus of the self, a bright, beautiful, dangerous, cloud-wrapped and mysterious neighbour. The novels function as fly-bys, not landing craft. Their measurements of self are indirect, extrapolative, and incomplete. Calvino never launched a landing expedition to his self, and now he cannot, so we must make what we can of the data sent back. We must remember, though, that this portrait results from oblique glances, not from direct confrontation. Nor have we any means of judging what distortions Calvino introduced, consciously or unconsciously.

Having reaffirmed the presence of the common core consisting of minimal units and assessing eye, I would now like to shift focus to the elements that set these two novels apart from the rest, and shall work through three stages of argument. The first will examine the limitations to language that Calvino discovers. These deprive him of one more protective screen between consciousness and cosmos. The second will examine his new techniques of interiorizing and the selves that emerge from this scrutiny. The third will delineate the new developments in his quest for meaning.

Language is one of the most basic barriers between consciousness and the cosmos, as well as one of the enabling conditions for any relationship at all. In other fictions, Calvino strips away history, story, science, and other shields that we use to protect our own fragility. In these novels he chips away at language, thus denying himself one more literary prop. When discussing Hypatia, he declares the untrustworthiness of this human necessity: 'There is no language without deceit' (p. 48) ('Non c'è linguaggio senza inganno' (p. 54)). However, in Olivia, he tells us that falsehood is never in words but in things.

The former, loosely interpreted, is a version of that strange loop or paradox, ' "All Cretans are liars," said a Cretan'. If language be interpreted as any *parole*, any instantiation of the total *langue*, then 'There is no language without deceit' must in some sense be deceitful and hence a lie. However, Calvino's later assigning the falsehood to things rather than words simply contradicts the previous statement, and leaves him with no philosophical stance upon which to rely.¹¹

¹¹ In 'The Written and the Unwritten Word' Calvino describes schools of thought about language as follows: 'The one says: The world doesn't exist, only language exists. The other says: The common language has no meaning; the world is literally unspeakable. . . . The first

Most of the comments about language and its limitations in *Invisible Cities* come from the italicized exchanges between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan that commence and close each numbered section. In Ib we are told that at first Marco Polo presents the emperor with objects and pantomimes emblematic of the cities: a skull with a pearl in its teeth, or a naked man running through fire unscathed. At the normal level of discourse, these are unsatisfactory, since the Khan cannot tell whether the emblem represents the city or an adventure that befell his interlocutor. As we learn in IIb uncertainty reaches further, since arrows might be intended to evoke war, abundance of game, or an armourer's shop. What draws the Khan is the power of the emblems; they are mysteriously coherent; they compel remembrance; they modify his understanding of the city. So powerful are these remembered images that even when Marco Polo can speak eloquently, the Khan feels dissatisfied with the verbal account. We learn in IIb that Polo goes back to gestures and objects, finding that words fail him when he tries to convey life as lived in the cities. We also learn that the Khan prefers these emblems because they are surrounded by a void, an absence of words. They open up space for contemplation. But even in this form of communication, something is lacking. After curt verbal information, the two fall back on gestures:

A new kind of dialogue was established: the Great Khan's white hands, heavy with rings, answered with stately movements the sinewy, agile hands of the merchant. As an understanding grew between them, their hands began to assume fixed attitudes, each of which corresponded to a shift of mood, in their alternation and repetition. And as the vocabulary of things was renewed with new samples of merchandise, the repertory of mute comment tended to become closed, stable. The pleasure of falling back on it also diminished in both; in their conversations, most of the time, they remained silent and immobile. (p. 39)

Una nuova specie di dialogo si stabilì tra loro: le bianche mani del Gran Kan, cariche d'annei, rispondevano con movimenti composti a quelle agili e nodose del mercante. Col crescere d'un'intesa tra loro, le mani presero ad assumere atteggiamenti stabili, che corrispondevano ognuno a un movimento dell'animo, nel loro alternarsi e ripetersi. E mentre il vocabolario delle cose si rinnovava con i campionari delle mercanzie, il repertorio dei commenti muti tendeva a chiudersi e a fissarsi. Anche il piacere a ricorrervi diminuiva in entrambi; nelle loro conversazioni restavano il più del tempo zitti e immobili. (p. 46)

In addition to being false or less adequate than emblematic images, language can betray hearer and speaker in other ways. In VIa the Khan challenges Marco Polo to tell about Venice, and learns that he has been

current has its source in today's Paris: the second flows from the turn of the century in Vienna, but has gone through several revivals. . . . Both offer the writer a challenge: the first, to use a language responsible only to itself; the other, to use a language in order to reach the silence of the world' (p. 38). He goes on to argue for a third position, the phenomenological.

learning something about Venice in every cityscape described. For Polo as individual, Venice remains the prime city, and his ability to understand cities comes from the internal comparisons he makes to this mental template. The Khan naturally prefers that words ostensibly referring to Chinese cities should refer to them and not somehow to Venice. When he in turn challenges Polo to describe Venice in its entirety, Polo refuses because the words might destroy his remembered images.

'Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased', Polo said. 'Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little.' (p. 87)¹²

'—Le immagini della memoria, una volta fissate con le parole, si cancellano,—disse Polo.—Forse Venezia ho paura di perderla tutta in una volta, se ne parlo. O forse, parlando d'altre città, l'ho già perduta a poco a poco.' (p. 94)

In the preface to the second edition of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, Calvino argues that writing from experience destroys one's memories of those experiences and renders one 'the poorest of men'; wrestling with the words is evidently a dangerous occupation.

Words have limits not confined to their inadequacy. We deduce this from Calvino's preference for images and emblems and from his reiterated statement that his stories start from single visual images. We learn his reasons in the *Normal* interview with Maria Corti (1986), when he admits that writing kills an idea. Not only do words fail to communicate all that is happening in an exchange (the implicit references to Venice), they destroy other methods of conceptualizing and controlling experience and they impoverish the author who uses them.

When we turn to *Mr. Palomar* we find Calvino worrying over some of these same limitations, but more central is the concern for those insights that cannot be expressed through words, insights that come through silence if they are to come at all. Silence most often is exalted, while language and its variants are degraded to trivialities. The tortoises, for instance, make noises throughout the courtship, but are silent during their copulation, and communicate so little in any fashion that Palomar is not absolutely sure that copulation is taking place. When studying black-birds, Palomar wonders whether the real message lies in the silence rather than the whistle.

Mr. Palomar always hopes that silence contains something more than language can say. But what if language were really the goal toward which everything in existence tends? Or what if everything that exists were language, and has been since the beginning of time? Here Mr. Palomar is again gripped by anguish. (p. 27)

¹² Pedullà (1972) argues that behind all the cities (even Venice) is Calvino's own city of youth, San Remo.

Il signor Palomar spera sempre che il silenzio contenga qualcosa di più di quello che il linguaggio può dire. Ma se il linguaggio fosse davvero il punto d'arrivo a cui tende tutto ciò che esiste? O se tutto ciò che esiste fosse linguaggio, già dal principio dei tempi? Qui il signor Palomar è ripreso dall'angoscia. (p. 29)

Copito de Nieve, the albino gorilla, holds an automobile tyre as if it could somehow make sense of his life: 'Perhaps identifying himself with it, the gorilla is about to reach, in the depths of silence, the springs from which language burst forth' (p. 83) ('Forse immedesimandosi in esso il gorilla è sul punto di raggiungere al fondo del silenzio le sorgenti da cui scaturisce il linguaggio' (p. 84)). Palomar pictures each one of us holding such a tyre and seeking in it 'some final meaning, which words cannot achieve' (p. 83) ('il senso ultimo a cui le parole non giungono' (p. 84)).

Palomar is fascinated by the Japanese sand garden because it aims at contemplation of the absolute 'without recourse to concepts capable of verbal expression' (p. 91) ('senza il ricorso a concetti esprimibili con parole' (p. 93)). This Zen garden reflects the aims of the Zen koans, which are famous for overturning verbal and rational modes of thought. When learning to be dead, he is disgruntled to find that he achieves no wordless understanding.

In 'On biting the tongue' Palomar analyses his developing habit of repressing speech, or refusing to respond verbally, until his silence becomes a kind of speech because it rejects the way others use words. Every time he bites his tongue and refrains from talking, he feels he must consider not only the various things he might say, but also all the possible answers.

Having tested language against silence, against things, against experience, against communication, against truth, Calvino also tests it against death. Palomar decides to describe every instant between his present time and death; since the description takes longer than the instant, the effort to describe will obliterate thoughts of death. At that moment of insight, he dies. Carlino points out that Palomar's growing distrust of words hardly seems to justify non-stop discourse; he further claims that this decision makes writing equivalent to life, and so discourse about life would become discourse about discourse and hence a monstrous tautology. I would hate to claim that Palomar never contradicts himself; after all, he changes his mind frequently. However, non-stop discourse may be babble, or it may be the precise descriptions and analyses we have been seeing. Palomar may be thinking of dedicating his mind to creating such descriptions, models of sorts, and for these, Calvino shows considerable respect here and elsewhere. I would argue that whereas language fails in the other tests, it can claim at least limited success in this plan of Palomar's, for the words do block thoughts of death and engage him in

an activity that Calvino most of the time seems to consider worthwhile. True, words cannot save him from death, but what could?

Problematizing of language is one of the features that sets these two novels apart from the rest.¹³ When the screen of words protecting the self wears thin, glimpses of that self show through, and the presence of self is another such feature. Without being demonstrably autobiographical, these works both seem to carry the impress of Calvino's imagination, a mirror image or matrix that is more personal and less displaced and symbolic than found in his earlier literature, except perhaps in some of the comments in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* when the narrator talks about his own habits in writing.

In *Invisible Cities* our sense of being within a single mind rather than actually hearing a dialogue between two men flickers on and off, but Calvino establishes that possibility in several episodes. In IIa we find a hall-of-mirrors situation in which both are imagining the same exchange: Marco Polo imagines answering or the Khan imagines that Polo answers; the Khan interrupts Polo or imagines interrupting him, and Polo imagines himself interrupted, and so forth. When cities, like dreams, are declared to be founded upon desires and fears, we sense the possibility that they are the dreams or day-dreams of this composite mind, for desires and fears are the foundations of our own dreams. When the Khan quizzes Marco Polo about Venice, he already knows the answers, knows that Polo comes from a city with canals, shows his knowledge later—in an imagined exchange—that it can also be called La Serenissima. The ontological reality of the travels is seriously destabilized by VIIa; perhaps the two just sit in the garden and imagine their alternate, active lives. Perhaps instead the activities are real and their twilight communications are imagined. In VIIb they play Berkeleian games with the notion that things not thought of do not exist, and while they can consider the possibility that they themselves do not exist, they never consider that one exists and the other not; they are a joint cogito that cannot doubt their other halves—in other words, a single mind. And that mind ceases to pretend to historical distance from Calvino's when it talks about Los Angeles and Manhattan. The mind becomes increasingly akin to Calvino's own when Polo produces his remarks about the inferno of today, echoing as it does the exhortation of Calvino's 'La sfida al labirinto'.

If the two are symbolically one mind at least partly akin to Calvino's

¹³ Cannon (1980, 1981) and Calligaris argue that Calvino loses faith in the power of language and in literary signification as early as *The Nonexistent Knight* and *The Baron in the Trees*. Good counter-arguments to theirs are offered by Andrews. I do not suggest that at the later stage Calvino despaired of language, just that he forced himself to put aside his usual presuppositions and see where the insecurities and instabilities thus released would take him.

own rather than separate persons, what impulses more specifically do they represent? Kublai Khan is an emperor; perhaps 'emperor of all he surveys' is some clue to his function.¹⁴ Palomar asserts that precise and careful observation conveys a kind of possession of the objects surveyed, even if they are the planets seen through a telescope. The Khan tries to possess his empire more firmly by learning of it through his foreign observer. His role as possessor may stem from this sense that possession comes from knowing.

Like the Khan, Calvino enjoys emblems, as he admits in 'Quickness' (*Six Memos*, 48). Even as the emperor tries to develop models and apply them in order to predict cities, so does Calvino obviously cherish modelling and the thoughts and comparisons it fosters. When the Khan sees the empire as crystal, or dreams of a city noted for lightness and airiness, when he derides emotionalism or cherishes a magic atlas, we see Calvinian concerns also expressed in *Collezione di sabbia* and *Six Memos*.

If the emperor resembles Calvino in his liking for models, Marco Polo resembles him in several attitudes and attributes. As nominal producer of most of the descriptions, Polo is artist and writer. He explains (or imagines explaining) that what he seeks is in some sense himself: one finds the foreignness of one's past selves only in foreign places. '*Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have*' (p. 29) ('*L'altrove è uno specchio in negativo. Il viaggiatore riconosce il poco che è suo, scoprendo il molto che non ha avuto e non avrà*' (p. 35)). Polo sees this mirror-function of the cities, and implicitly condemns the empire for trying to grow accustomed to its sores (to the inferno, to the labyrinth). Like Calvino in the preface to the second edition of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, Polo fears to lose Venice by describing its uniqueness. Also a link: Polo is granted the power to produce the brilliant fantasia exfoliating out from two empty chess squares.

These two observers are thus oblique reflections of self, but if Frasson-Marin (1977) is correct that travel literature seeks the self, then the cities too ought to embody self. If they do, to what extent does that embedded self belong to Calvino? Their labels—memory, desire, signs, trading (i.e. exchanges, combinatorial play), and eyes—might be said to bear the impress of Calvino pure and simple. 'Thin cities', in so far as their thinness or 'sottilità' relates to airiness and lightness, are similarly characteristic. Concern with the dead, names, the hidden, and the sky reflect interests not much documented in the other fiction, but interest in 'continuity', memorialized in continuous cities, is well attested to in

¹⁴ De Lauretis (1978) talks about his totalizing approach to what he learns; Breiner focuses on Kublai Khan, and sees in his reactions to Polo's accounts an allegory of the traditional reader who looks for unities.

Mr. Palomar. Palomar devotes his attention to finding just such continuities between the individual and the universe.

The cities reflect other values already witnessed in Calvino's work, another process of indirect mirroring. Women exist as sexual objects, beautiful, mostly distant and beyond reach but occasionally willing to pleasure strangers. Men, however, appear as craftsmen, workmen, as functionaries (soldiers), or as roles (braggart, miser), not as sexual rivals and not as individuals. Indeed, inhabitants in general are abstractions, never characters. The cities, by being mostly pre-modern technologically, are suitable vehicles for Calvino's nostalgia. Intellectually, he may realize the dangers of nostalgia.¹⁵ He may also see virtues in technology at times, but frequently he resists its allure. One finds a kind of space-pastoral in the cosmicomical tales, and *Invisible Cities* manifests longing for societies bound by rituals and traditions. In pre-industrial societies, such inherited rituals were enough to give a sense of meaning. Calvino does not seriously explore the burdens and tyrannies of such systems: the inhabitants of Ersilia, after all, abandon their city and build a new one when their ties become too constricting—an ultra-civilized solution rarely tried in real life. Calvino inclines toward highly selective aspects of the past in general, and these cities mirror that fantasy structure of his mind. Also perhaps a reflection of his tastes is the return of the mythical beasts of Theodora; Calvino did much to resuscitate Ariosto for contemporary Italian audiences, and he values Enlightenment reason and emotional control, nearly 'mythical' properties in our own age.

Mirroring of selves is more obvious in the cities associated with models. Inhabitants of such towns, whose pattern echoes that of a carpet or the stars, are always comparing themselves to this model. The inhabitants of Baucis stare with fascination at the ground far beneath them, entranced even by their own absence, and by negation, with themselves. Coming at the middle point of the sequence, that obsession with observation of everything but oneself (at least directly) emblemizes the indirect and glancing nature of the mirroring of self going on in the cityscapes.¹⁶

In *Mr. Palomar*, the inward turn to a plausibly individualized mind strikes one as most unusual for this author, but welcome. Almost every episode contributes a highly personal detail about Palomar's outlook. In

¹⁵ He decries such searches for utopian futures in supposedly lost pasts in 'Ricordare il futuro', an entry in one of his Palomar columns, 'L'osservatorio del Signor Palomar'. See Almansi (1973) for a critique of Calvino's nostalgia.

¹⁶ Carlo Ossola notes that the centrality of the city Baucis has Ovidian causes. At the centre of the *Metamorphoses* (VIII.611–721) is the story of Baucis and Philemon, a story of fidelity and *pietas*. Calvino tells us that those who travel to Baucis will not succeed in seeing it, perhaps because such fidelity is not easily to be found. In Ovid, Philemon asks that he not see Baucis die, and that she not have to bury him. The motif of not-seeing thus attaches to Baucis in another fashion, one very different from the fascination with self associated with the city Baucis.

the wave sequence, we learn that he is nervous, cuts himself off from the frenzied world, and tries to keep his sensations and emotions under control; also that his irritable anxiety may bring on a gastric ulcer or heart attack because he feels so thwarted by his inability to master the complexity of the world through breaking it into comprehensible units. In 'The naked bosom' and 'The loves of the tortoises' we see some of his attitudes towards women and female nudity, and towards eros. These stretch from gratitude to alienation and embarrassment. They contain a strong voyeuristic component, but the usual arousal of the voyeur is repressed in favour of self-conscious analysis. We also note his ability to get so wrapped up in his own cogitations that he fails to understand the impact his actions are having on others. 'The sword of the sun' suggests that he has three egos, a megalomaniac, a depressive and self-wounding force, and a more equable arbiter. The megalomaniac supplies him with the whimsies that make his presence necessary to the universe: the moon craves his attention, the sun's sword needs his eye, the gourmet delicacies ought to yearn to be bought by him alone. We learn from his encounter with pigeons that he suffered in his youth from the belief that salvation lay in applying oneself to things at hand. His inability to interact with others causes him many embarrassments. When he contemplates models, we see him using procedures that are clearly Calvino's own. No previous Calvino character is so coherent a tangle of tensions and desires, let alone so expressive of mental processes attested to as Calvino's own by the nature of his fabrications.¹⁷

In 'The universe as mirror' Palomar's exploration of self reaches its most tense expression. 'Mr. Palomar, who does not love himself, has always taken care not to encounter himself face to face' (p. 119) ('Palomar, non amandosi, ha sempre fatto in modo di non incontrarsi con se stesso faccia a faccia' (p. 121)). However, he determines this encounter to be necessary and reminds himself that he can know nothing about the universe if he does not understand himself: 'The universe is the mirror in which we can contemplate only what we have learned to know in ourselves' (p. 119) ('l'universo è lo specchio in cui possiamo contemplare solo ciò che abbiamo imparato a conoscere in noi' (p. 121)). So now that his gaze can turn inward, what does he see?

Will his inner world seem to him an immense, calm rotation of a luminous spiral? Will he see stars and planets navigating in silence on the parabolas and ellipses

¹⁷ In 'Sono un po' stanco di essere Calvino', an interview with Giulio Nascimbeni (1984), the author admits to his lack of interest in psychological interiority. 'That's something I often say, perhaps with the secret desire to hear someone say, "but no, you are really extremely penetrating psychologically." However this never happens, that is, no one ever responds thus' ('Euna cosa che dico spesso, forse col segreto desiderio di sentirmi replicare: ma no, anche tu sei penetrantissimo psicologicamente. Però questo non avviene mai, cioè nessuno mi risponde così').

that determine character and destiny? Will he contemplate a sphere of infinite circumference that has the ego as its centre and its centre in every point?

He opens his eyes. What appears to his gaze is something he seems to have seen already, every day: streets full of people, hurrying, elbowing their way ahead, without looking one another in the face, among high walls, sharp and peeling. In the background, the starry sky scatters intermittent flashes like a stalled mechanism, which jerks and creaks in all its unoled joints, outposts of an endangered universe, twisted, restless as he is. (pp. 119–20)

Gli apparirà il suo mondo interiore come un calmo immenso ruotare d'una spirale luminosa? Vedrà navigare in silenzio stelle e pianeti sulle parabole e le ellissi che determinano il carattere e il destino? Contemplerà una sfera di circonferenza infinita che ha l'io per centro e il centro in ogni punto?

Aprè gli occhi: quel che appare al suo sguardo gli sembra d'averlo già visto tutti i giorni: vie piene di gente che ha fretta e si fa largo a gomitate, senza guardarsi in faccia, tra alte mura spigolose e scrostate. In fondo, il cielo stellato sprizza bagliori intermittenti come un meccanismo inceppato, che sussulta e cigola in tutte le sue giunture non oliate, avamposti d'un universo pericolante, contorto, senza requie come lui. (pp. 121–2)

Trying to find himself at last, Palomar finds reflected the world he has been contemplating, and this may be a metaphor for a radically decentred self. There is a continuity between consciousness and cosmos, between mind and matter, so much so that the self cannot be disentangled, if it indeed exists at all. How one takes this final attempt to lift the veil depends upon how one takes the rest of *Mr. Palomar*. The first time I read the novel, I found the alienation of the protagonist depressing.¹⁸ Upon successive readings, I have found the pieces increasingly hilarious until the serious element has receded considerably in importance. This coy failure to remove the last veil can be tragic, or just a climactic, predictable frustration in the series of failed attempts to order the universe.¹⁹ It can also be taken as Calvino's joke upon us as readers. Throughout, Palomar has obviously been avoiding confrontation with himself and with humanity. We find him gearing up for the great breakthrough, and so we gear up emotionally ourselves—but by now we should realize that no such breakthrough can or will occur. Calvino's glancing, oblique approaches toward self suggest that he believes the invisible can only be observed indirectly.

One might also argue that Calvino flirts with portraying the self while avoiding that as being in a sense too easy. At the end of *Six Memos*, he questions the necessity of novels reflecting the self of the writer:

But perhaps the answer that stands closest to my heart is something else: Think

¹⁸ Christensen's approach to alienation in Calvino links it to the definitions of both Kierkegaard and Marx. For the commensurability of these two disparate theories of alienation, see James L. Marsh.

¹⁹ For tragic or negative interpretations, see Schulz-Buschhaus (1987) and Ricci (1984).

what it would be to have a work conceived from outside the *self*, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic. . . .

Was this not perhaps what Ovid was aiming at, when he wrote about the continuity of forms? And what Lucretius was aiming at when he identified himself with that nature common to each and every thing? (*Six Memos*, 124)²⁰

Ma forse la risposta che mi sta più a cuore dare è un'altra: magari fosse possibile un'opera concepita al di fuori del *self*, un'opera che ci permettesse d'uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d'un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma per far parlare ciò che non ha parola, l'uccello che si posa sulla grondaia, l'albero in primavera e l'albero in autunno, la pietra, il cemento, la plastica. . . .

Non era forse questo il punto d'arrivo cui tendeva Ovidio nel raccontare la continuità delle forme, il punto d'arrivo cui tendeva Lucrezio nell'identificarsi con la natura comune a tutte le cose? (*Lezioni americane*, 120)

Thus in *Mr. Palomar* he avoids painting himself into a corner. Everything he has found up to now tells him that here is no one answer and possibly no answer workable for him to the question of how the cosmos and cogito relate one to the other. Having looked hard, he withdraws. The fictions that were in progress when he died mostly avoid even the limited amount of personal exposure we sense in *Mr. Palomar*. 'Le memorie di Casanova' are told through the voice of one who was master of escape from entanglements. In two of the stories in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, the title story and 'The Name, the Nose', Calvino's self was well screened, at least as far as vulnerability goes. Only in 'A King Listens' do we find a self-revealing protagonist, and that personage is so exquisitely sensitive because he is pinned to a single place, a single pose. Michel Foucault writes something perhaps relevant to Calvino's refusal to unveil when he says, 'I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.' (1972: 17) Perhaps the principles of the 1964 preface to *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* apply here: writing the self directly would be to lose it. As a writer turns memories into fiction, the memories self-destruct, leaving the writer the poorest of men. For whatever reasons, Calvino chose to limit his explorations of self to a fly-by probe, to sidelong glances, and to oblique reflections.

²⁰ Although Calvino did not write anything from the point of view of plastic, he did in 1985 translate Raymond Queneau's 'Le chant du Styrene' as 'La canzone del polistirene', a poem celebrating plastic if not giving it direct voice. This piece relates thematically and conceptually to Queneau's *Petite Cosmogonie portative*. Calvino wrote a guide for puzzled readers to the Italian translation of that strange cosmogonic opus.

What did Calvino learn from denying himself untroubled reliance upon language? By denying the temptation to reveal the self? Apparently lessons learned differently in earlier fiction: the importance of lightness, and the desirability of cultivating a particular attitude toward experience. Since I shall discuss these in depth in Chapter 7, let me simply sketch basics here. The invisible cities which seem most flexible and attractive, most likely to survive in some form, are those who handle their bulk with a certain lightness. The inhabitants move freely, abandon the old city when it becomes encrusted, start again. The cities sway upward upon pilings or hang upon a web of ropes. The carnival half of Sophronia, with its spindly structures, is what lasts; the banks and concrete slab constructions are taken down. The Khan calls attention to a city so gracefully pinnacled that the Moon condescends to rest upon its slender frames, and the Moon rewards that city with the ability to grow in lightness. In *Mr. Palomar* lightness sparkles in the gap between Palomar's frustrated actions and what we are invited to see, his delicious ridiculousness. Lightness is in the handling, in assuring us that Palomar stops inspecting the Moon when he is sure that the Moon no longer needs him, for instance.

In *Six Memos* Calvino discusses 'lightness', the quality which he feels he has tried to impart to heavenly and human bodies. As he admits in that lecture, his early attempts to produce politically correct writing simply mired him in the opacity and inertia of the world. Somehow that mode was foreign to his genius. In *Mr. Palomar* he admits that the dead have a gaiety that comes from their irresponsibility, from their sense that they cannot solve other people's problems and their relief at giving up the pretence. But lightness is not just irresponsibility or abdication. It is won with difficulty from the sticky, ponderous substances of the world, from the flux-as-paste that clings, trying to capture us as if it were quicksand. Heaney has the right picture of Calvino on a high wire; there is an airiness, an elevation, and a dancing scintillation that comes from supreme effort, and from the absence of safety-net. One finds no such airy lightness in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and only some in *If on a winter's night a traveler*; the consciousness behind those novels, particularly the former, is desperate to spin and maintain whatever web it can.

The desired attitude towards experience is given pride of place in *Invisible Cities*. In his very last words, Marco Polo tells the Khan not to despair at the prospect of living in inferno:

There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (p. 165)

'Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio. (p. 170)

Palomar has not accustomed himself to the inferno or labyrinth; he is never used to it. He is always seeing it afresh, prodding his jaded and cynical consciousness to respond to phenomenological newness, insisting that he jettison automatic reactions in favour of fresh confrontations.²¹ And he continues to look for a way out. That he never finds one is not the point. To the moment of death, he searches with just the amount of lightness that will permit him to live and continue his enterprise, and not become bogged down.

John Donne tells us, 'If thou beest borne to strange sights, | Things invisible to see, | Ride ten thousand days and nights . . .'—not a bad description of Marco Polo's brief. Donne seeks a woman who is both true and fair. Polo seeks cities or himself—no Casanova he—but his goal might none the less be called the true and fair, the real and the beautiful. Despite his best efforts, reality proves ungraspable. Likewise, Palomar focuses on things normally invisible to us, whether the gecko's digestive tract or the iguana's apparent existence on a different time-scale from humans. He seeks a model that will be true and fair. Fairness is easily come by; harmony, precision, elegant tracery—these the mind produces readily and with pleasure. But truth does not emerge and stand fast. He can only be true to his quest. Calvino also seeks things beautiful to see which are also true. He, at least, is artist enough to gratify such wishes, for readers if not for himself.²²

²¹ Cannon (1985) discusses Calvino's reliance on phenomenology in *Mr. Palomar*.

²² See Hume, who analyses Calvino's 'questione d'amore or Tiresian determination as to which party enjoys the finest pleasures—author, interpreter, or non-professional reader' (1986: 76). Calvino tries various emphases and pleasures in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, *Invisible Cities*, and *If on a winter's night a traveler*, but overall, the reader seems most pleased and least anxious.

Interior Cosmos, Inward Civilization

I don't know if I shall succeed, but my efforts, in this case as in the others, are not merely aimed at making a book but also at changing myself, the goal of all human endeavor.

(*'The Written and the Unwritten Word'*, 39)

Changing oneself is the goal of all human endeavour? What changes does Calvino have in mind? Uncontrollable metamorphoses are common enough in his fabulations, but intentional change of self? About self-moulding, he says very little and yet . . . the imperative is there, submerged but increasingly close to the surface in his later works.

We have looked at the fantasy structures of Calvino's mind as they shape his fictions, and up to the present I have largely avoided a chronological and developmental framework. In order to round this study off, however, I need to answer my initial question—what is the nature of Calvino's endeavour? Previous chapters give us some sense of Calvino's constant concerns; we can now ask what elements change, what new interests develop, what ploys prove unsatisfactory and are left behind. I would like to use this final chapter to express in different terms and so present a different perspective on (a) his endeavour, (b) his cosmic vision, (c) his quest for meaning, and (d) his answers to the questions he was always asking about cogito and cosmos. Those answers relate to tyranny, inward civilization, and the role of the individual.

The Nature of Calvino's Endeavour

Calvino's endeavour seems generated by two ever-present impulses. One is the anxiety of the I facing the non-I, trying to organize the surrounding cosmos lest the I be dissolved therein. The cogito, by always organizing and understanding, wards off engulfment by flux. That flux or paste bears fugitive overtones of the feminine and of death. The second impulse is Calvino's obsessive quest for meaning.

Meaning in life is a matter of emotions, not logic. If your life seems meaningful, you feel at one with your surrounds or work or society. You feel that you fit in, that life is worth living, and that what you do has some

value. You live in the present rather than long nostalgically and vainly for the past, or wastefully for the future. Lack of meaning results in alienation, a state of mind linked by Marx to the industrial world. In religion, meaning is established in terms of a relationship to divine powers, and actions become meaningful by matching them to a code of behaviour, or by shaping them with an afterlife or reincarnation in mind. In political thought, meaning comes from dedicating your energies to a cause, to working for a goal that will help certain people or damage others. For some individuals, rising to power in society gives life a sense of meaning. However, for a set of life-defining values to win respect, we normally demand that it bear up under the pressure of personal tragedy or catastrophe, both of which have a way of robbing superficial meaning-structures of their power to make lives seem worthwhile.

Meaning often involves a sense of happily fitting in. Calvino's underlying anxiety is that instead of fitting in and having a place, the cogito will be swallowed up or dissolved. Hence, these two impulses, the fear of engulfment and the desire to fit in meet head on, their clash generating much of what he writes.

Associated with these two impulses are two assumptions. The first is that meaning will probably bring with it a sense of happiness. (So, of course, would establishing the I's invulnerability to dissolution.) The other, for Calvino's intensely cerebral *alter egos*, is that meaning is somehow linked to knowledge. He frequently represents knowledge in its most basic form: the discovery of likeness. Whether the field is zoology or etymology or astronomy or literature, we classify a new phenomenon primarily by means of its similarities to other entities already known and fitting into a discourse or network of knowledge. Calvino keeps hoping that discovery of likenesses and congruities will give the cogito the knowledge it lacks, and hence, a sense of fitting in. His model-making in the later works belongs to this presupposition about knowledge. In science, models support the correctness of hypotheses by letting the researcher predict future developments correctly. For Calvino, too, the model that works (i.e. bears a marked likeness) attests to the solidity of the knowledge. If the situation he observes does not lend itself to resemblance and modelling, then he often tries to work out relationships through metaphors of 'bridges' and 'lines'. Linking one isolated fact or entity to another entity makes them part of a network, a system of values or meaning.

Behind the endeavour, then, is an anxiety and a search for meaning. He presupposes that meaning is most likely to come through knowledge, and knowledge to come through discovery of likeness. Specifically, he works this out through what I call his cosmic vision, a metaphysic based on a particulate material reality. The particles may dance in orderly

patterns, or may coagulate into paste or flux, in which case they prove impervious to organization, and incapable of yielding useful knowledge.

Calvino's Cosmic Vision

This term 'cosmic vision' was first suggested to me by the galactic setting of the cosmicomical tales, but cosmos and related concepts actually apply to Calvino's vision at several levels, as I realized when reading Angus Fletcher's study of allegory. Fletcher notes that cosmos 'signifies (1) a universe, and (2) a symbol that implies rank in a hierarchy. . . . it denotes both a *large-scale order* (macrocosmos) and the small-scale *sign of that order* (microcosmos).' (1970: 109–10) The latter concept—the small-scale emblem representing the large-scale order—is the word from which we derive the word 'cosmetic'; such an emblem or ornament is cosmetic when it relates the person or object bearing it to the hierarchy of the particular cosmos. Fletcher notes (p. 145) that in keeping with 'the anxiety and uncertainty of modern value judgments' we find that the 'ambivalent kosmos' has become 'the dominant type' in authors like Kafka. Thus the ornament or emblem need not denote rank in a hierarchy, just place within the system, whatever sort of system it may be: Gregor Samsa's insect-like appearance is such a cosmetic sign. A third component of cosmos stresses the regularity of the rules attaching to such a universe: cosmos sometimes meant 'law' and sometimes 'magistrate', 'the one who lays down the universal system under which the elements of society are ordered' (1970: 112). Yet a fourth meaning of cosmos relevant to Calvino is that implied by binary opposition to chaos. Cosmos is what results when the chaotic universe is organized by humanity's exercise of reason, observation, induction, and imagination. Science fiction, for example, has been defined as showing chaos tamed into cosmos by application of the scientific method.¹ I sometimes speak of Calvino's symbolic cosmoi; they seem different because their organizing assumptions differ, because they offer different interpretations of the reality we know in one form from science.

Cosmos as universe obviously applies to Calvino's settings for the cosmicomical tales. Qfwfq rides the galaxies for the galactic great year (600 million of ours), witnesses the Big Bang, experiences the expanding universe, and takes part in other such events known to cosmologists only through equations. While he was writing these stories, Calvino was calling for 'un'immagine cosmica' or cosmic picture with which to confront the labyrinthine industrial world ('La sfida al labirinto'). However, 'cosmic vision' would hardly characterize all of his work were this his only use of the term 'cosmos'.

¹ Gary K. Wolfe offers this definition of science fiction (1979: 4).

What *Cosmicomics* seems to have taught Calvino was how to create fictive cosmoi, smaller-scale systems that none the less expand to fill our readerly horizon until we practically forget that something exists outside of them. In 'Autobiography of a Spectator', Calvino notes that the films he watched as an adolescent had, on the screen,

the properties of a world—fullness, necessity, coherence—while off the screen heterogeneous elements accumulated, apparently assembled at random, the materials of my life which seemed to me completely lacking in form. (p. 25)

le proprietà d'un mondo, la pienezza, la necessità, la coerenza, mentre fuori dello schermo s'ammucchiavano elementi eterogenei che sembravano messi insieme per caso, i materiali della mia vita che mi parevano privi di qualsiasi forma. ('Autobiografia di uno spettatore', 43)

Fullness, necessity, coherence—these Calvino controls in unusual ways when he uses the tarot cards to create a self-sufficient world out of Western literature. We do not relate that world to ours but suffer ours to be supplanted. The narrator does not start off from a flat in Paris, nor does he inhabit any particular century. Once we are well launched into this fictive microcosmos, our twentieth century practically disappears, and so does our awareness that other literary traditions exist. We forget that the world can be defined in terms of science, social structures, economics, sex, or power. The literary units available through the tarots become the building blocks of a literary cosmos. The invisible cities have the same insidious consciousness-absorbing power. Calvino endows symbolic worlds with such coherence and haunting strangeness that they become fictive cosmoi or at least microcosmoi that reflect the particulate nature of Calvino's cosmos.

Fletcher's second meaning—cosmetic ornament or smaller-scale version of the primary cosmos—is central to Calvino's fantastic structures. He links one system to another in later books by means of mirror image, model, *mise en abyme* ekphrasis, or matrix. We see such doublings frequently in *Invisible Cities* and in the use of two tarot decks whose tales play off against one another. We see how the lesser world of the novel fragments merges with the outer world, and the Reader finds himself in strange worlds of a sort that he would only have met before in fiction. Palomar finds that his description of the composition of a lawn develops the same problems he has experienced in trying to describe the universe; that blackbirds model humans and vice versa. In the cosmicomical tales themselves, we find outward ornament or appearance to have the power of ranking or placing one within the system. Qfwfq as 'old one' or dinosaur must deal with 'new ones' and he displays a hyper-sensitive awareness of such outward signs of inner place. Similarly, in 'The Aquatic Uncle', Qfwfq makes status evaluations (hierarchy) on such outward shows of biological order. The style of cosmetic ornamentation

of the two tarot packs affects the tales they generate; the tales involving the more expensive cards are more courtly.

Calvino comments more than once on the power of such emblematic relationships. The Khan ultimately prefers Marco Polo's emblems to his fluent descriptions:

But, obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused. In the Khan's mind the empire was reflected in a desert of labile and interchangeable data, like grains of sand, from which there appeared, for each city and province, the figures evoked by the Venetian's logogriffs. (p. 22)

Ma, palese o oscuro che fosse, tutto quel che Marco mostrava aveva il potere degli emblemi, che una volta visti non si possono dimenticare né confondere. Nella mente del Kan l'impero si rifletteva in un deserto di dati labili e intercambiabili come grani di sabbia da cui emergevano per ogni città e provincia le figure evocate dai logogrifi del veneziano. (p. 30)

Indeed, Polo remarks that the Khan himself will become an emblem among emblems, as indeed he does in this book, an emblem for all Cartesian minds trying to make sense of their cosmoi.

In *Six Memos*, Calvino comments,

I have always preferred emblems that throw together incongruous and enigmatic figures, as in a rebus. Such are the butterfly and crab that illustrate *Festina lente* in the sixteenth-century collection of emblems by Paolo Giovio. Butterfly and crab are both bizarre, both symmetrical in shape, and between them establish an unexpected kind of harmony. (*Six Memos*, 48)

io ho sempre preferito gli emblemi che mettono insieme figure incongrue ed enigmatiche come rebus. Come la farfalla e il granchio che illustrano il *Festina lente* nella raccolta d'emblemi cinquecenteschi di Paolo Giovio, due forme animali entrambe bizzarre ed entrambe simmetriche, che stabiliscono tra loro un'inattesa armonia. (*Lezioni americane*, 47)

Such emblems are so important to Calvino because of his preference for defining meaning in terms of knowledge and knowledge in terms of likeness. A likeness or small cosmos at one level echoing the larger cosmos does establish a relationship, one implicitly leading to meaning. Hence, for Calvino, the search for meaning is to a large extent the attempt to find or create such microcosms, such cosmetic emblems, as a means of linking the individual entity to a larger system. For Palomar, too, likeness constitutes the basis for relationship.

The third meaning of cosmos, orderliness or regularity of the sort pertaining to laws, is also part of Calvino's search. Qfwfq often tries to figure out rules and what values to attach to them. What are the rules that will let him bet on the future ('How Much Shall We Bet?')? What sort of universe will be generated using this system or that, using shiny new hydrogen atoms or making 'fake' atoms ('Games Without End')? Are the

colours brought by atmosphere good or bad? Should one revere the 'nothing' out of which all springs, or the 'something' that has come into being from the 'nothing'? Qfwfq tests the limits of electromagnetic laws in 'Tempesta solare'. Marco Polo, by grouping his cities in strangely resonant but enigmatic categories, tests something about memory or desire or signs; the Khan meanwhile tries to use the information given to predict other cities—another testing of the rules. Calvino laments the power of his own internally generated rules in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*; the rules governing the use of the cards govern that cosmos, and he strains to the utmost to adapt to those regulations.

Finally, cosmos as the human interpretation of chaos, is central to Calvino's vision. Qfwfq tests our methods for taming chaos to cosmos in 'The Origin of the Birds' when he tries our various narratives for organizing experience—science, fairy-tale, photograph, prophecy, and the like. Palomar is intent upon rendering the formless ocean in apprehensible form. The empire is a bog and Polo's efforts go into rendering it in meaningful units. The Reader tries to make the events of his life 'behave' so that he can finish the book and marry the woman. One could call it a secular miracle of transubstantiation that all these Cartesian minds are trying to perform: the dangerous pasty flux must be transformed through exercise of the rational mind.

Once we realize that Calvino associates doubling structures with knowledge, and knowledge with meaning, we can make better sense of their use in his works.² Lacan's theory of the mirror stage sheds further light on the prominence of doubling structures. The mirror lets one see oneself and form a picture of one's otherwise unseeable boundaries; indeed it helps create the sense of a self, even while problematizing that self. Several Calvino characters grant fugitive recognition to this search for self. Marco Polo acknowledges that his cities all derive from an essential, inner Venice, from part of his past. Palomar wonders if his failure to encompass the universe stems from his ignorance of self, for the universe only mirrors that which we know in ourselves. The narrator in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* tries to find himself in the card paths, and fails. A defined, visible self would be less likely to dissolve helplessly into primordial, maternal flux.

A doubling structure that operates on a different level is 'riscrittura', the rewriting or recycling of extant literary material.³ One's own work thus possesses a double within one's own knowledge-network. *The Travels of Marco Polo* provides the textual springboard for *Invisible Cities*. Faust, Parsifal, Hamlet, Orlando, and Lear—to name only a few—beget several tarot tales. The Orpheus legend produces 'Il cielo di

² De Lauretis (1975) and Musarra both comment on Calvino's various forms of 'dédoulement'; Musarra sees this feature as characteristic of postmodernism.

³ Barilli (1974) discusses the poetics of 'riscrittura' and Calvino's use of that technique.

pietra' and 'Without Colors'. Less direct but still generative is Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, a strong precursor text of *Mr. Palomar* (to use Harold Bloom's term).⁴ *If on a winter's night a traveler* creates chapters that resemble the work of other writers, though they do not seem to imitate specific works; 'In a network of lines that intersect' reminds readers strongly of Borges, without being an imitation of any particular story. In its broad outlines, of course, that collection of interrupted stories most resembles its great forerunner, the *Thousand and One Nights*. Evidently 'riscrittura' permitted Calvino to define himself against and place himself within the literary tradition. That tradition, of course, represents a flux into which his works might dissolve, forgotten and unread, should he not find ways to give them selfhood by intensifying their definition and boundaries.

Calvino's concept of knowledge as likeness helps explain the role of cosmetic doubling structures. Similarly, other elements of his cosmic vision help us understand some of the reasons for continued tension and anxiety in his work. His desire to fit in clashes with fear of being engulfed. His desire for order clashes with his sensitivity to complexity and variability. Put in simplest terms, the rigid, crystalline models he prefers aesthetically and psychologically are ill adapted to representing metamorphic flux. Admirably, Calvino did in fact adapt and modify his original rigid impulses, and tracing the mismatch between flux and his mental structures produces several significant results.

The most obvious result is that time, as measured in human terms, virtually disappears from his fiction. Qfwfq does away with time as humans understand it by being apparently eternal. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan range ostensibly over space, but pay no attention to time. The magic atlas permits them to view cities that do not belong in their era at all. *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* aspires to a kind of timelessness by adopting a symbolic setting and the ancient but living icons of the tarots. Human time is present but unimportant in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. In *Mr. Palomar*, we find a rather sardonic portrait of somebody who, like Calvino, prefers thin, rigid slices of reality with unusually reduced chronological dimensions.

Although one's first reaction is to reject such an approach to flux as obviously inadequate, we must remember that it can yield *some* kinds of insights. Consider the electron microscope; one embeds a cell in plastic and then prepares micro-slices in order for this particular form of scrutiny to take place. No one denies the importance of what can be found out about cells through these cross-sectional slices, even if it has obvious limitations. So too is it with Calvino's habit of taking thin, nearly timeless cross-sections of reality. Palomar trying to isolate a wave, or

⁴ For Bloom's terminology, see Bloom (1973).

Marco Polo a city, or Qfwfq interpreting the universe entirely by means of signs: each is an example of such simplifying means for paring reality down to manageable proportions.

Calvino's timeless slices of reality might also be likened to the method used by linguistics, which looks at a language at one point in time whereas philology traces changes over time. The synchronic approach, in Calvino's observational technique as in linguistics, does limit what one can do with history or development. In fiction, for instance, character is reduced to a set of givens because development is not recognized by the achronic value system. If one correlates this excision of history to a philosophical stance, the implications are anti-romantic and anti-activist, for the configuration implies that the individual can make very little difference to the world, because his or her time is so limited. Such lack of time may make one over-conscious of history as all-engulfing, and yet cause one to feel that history has very little to do with one's own actions and private life.

In accepting this simplification of time, Calvino is careful not to strain his arguments. He does without significant time and uses a freeze-frame picture of the flux at one moment, but he is rigidly honest about the shortcomings of his method. Palomar lays all that bare when he talks about trying to build models; when he finds that they do not fit and realizes furthermore that they all involve exerting power, he tries to erase all models from his mind. The Khan tries to predict cities, but accepts Polo's various denials or modifications. The Reader adapts to the changing identifications of stories' authors. Qfwfq defines the universe in terms of colour, or 'nothing', or neatness, and then comes to recognize the competing values of colourlessness, 'something', and informality. Calvino's Casanova simultaneously courts Cate and Ilda, but learns that he cannot apply the same rules to both.

Since honesty compels Calvino to grant the limitations of any model, he tries to improve his ability to deal with flux by multiplying the number of models used. In a way, he duplicates the principle of film: a series of still shots seen in sequence can mimic the appearance of action and thus can model movement. Calvino develops this method of linking model to flux in two fashions. One is simply his trying as many models as possible: Palomar illustrates this in his never-ending quest for patterns that match parts of the cosmos. Calvino's other tactic is to develop models that are discontinuous in time and place. When discussing Fourier and utopias in 'On Fourier, III: Envoi: A Utopia of Fine Dust', Calvino says that he only hopes now for a utopia consisting of disparate particles. In *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo says that the city he seeks is discontinuous in space and time, bits of it to be found in all sorts of cities, its qualities being sometimes evanescent, sometimes more concentrated.

Logically such a fragmented model can only be integrated within the

mind of the modeller or seeker: 'utopia not as a city that can be founded by us but that can found itself in us, build itself brick by brick in our ability to imagine it' (*The Uses of Literature*, 252) ('l'utopia come città che non potrà essere fondata da noi ma fondare se stessa dentro di noi, costruirsi pezzo per pezzo nella nostra capacità d'immaginarla' (*Una pietra sopra*, 252)). Muzzioli gives the most detailed analysis of Calvino's pulviscular utopias. Calvino's internalizing such a fragmented model accords with his rejection of history, as Guardiani notes:

History, Calvino has shown since his earliest works, does not 'proceed'; progress and development are false objectives. History is here and now. Man's constructive attitude, then, can only be directed internally, to man's growth in the understanding of himself. (1986: 61)

This inward arena of action will be important when we come to discuss the role of the mind in Calvino's philosophy. For now, I wish to note that the only total integration possible is mental, though Calvino also believes that the discontinuous bits can grow larger, and some may even merge. Marco Polo's final comment is that we must learn to recognize those people and places within our inferno that are not infernal, and give them space and help them endure.

The discontinuous ideal, integratable in one's mind, seems to be what Calvino was heading towards. All the pieces of the argument are present. This line of thought permits his meshing timeless, fragmentary slices to the complexities of flux, in part because discontinuity in time introduces a film-like way to handle the chronological dimension of that flux. This solution does not lead to solid utopias or world-changing models, but to our being able to create our own—perhaps utopian—mental furnishings. This discontinuous solution ultimately lets Calvino link aesthetically satisfying (to him) crystalline patterns to the cosmos without tyrannically distorting flux to fit that sort of static still-frame. This discovery has great potential for Calvino's thinking, and might have proved important to him had he lived to develop it. As things stand, this means of integrating discontinuous patterns to his aesthetic and metaphysic remains latent in his later works; he had not fully developed it at the point when cranial haemorrhage struck him down.

Calvino's Quest for Meaning

How successful was Calvino in his quest for meaning? At no point does he relax, with an 'Aha! I have it!' Does that signify a bootless quest? Do some novels suggest that he comes closer to his goal than he does in others? Does he ever seem to feel that he has achieved meaning, however fleetingly? These are the questions I should like to address now.

Let me deal very briefly with the pre-cosmicomic novels and

novellas. They focus the search for meaning in a slightly different fashion, stressing the questions of how to be authentic and how to find something worth doing. Meaning, after all, is unlikely in a life devoted to activities felt to be inauthentic.

Joining a group or party is the political answer to authenticity and meaning. However, Pin's attaching himself to one person or party and then another shows Calvino's awareness from his earliest work that such allegiances are usually quite random. They can spring up from casual acts of no significance. Pin is just as willing to consider joining the Black Brigade and gain acceptance that way as he is to work for the Partisans. Given his desire for acceptance, can any identification with a group be authentic? Pin certainly gives us no grounds for asserting the value of joining other than for its strictly psychological benefits.

Agilulf struggles literally with authenticity. If the woman he rescued proves not to have been an authentic virgin, then his knighthood is spurious and must be rescinded, no matter what worthy deeds he has performed in the mean time. Cosimo strives to work out a life that will be true to his self-definition. He will feel authentic only if he lives a gentlemanly, helpful, interesting, active life—without descending from the trees. Whereas Agilulf succumbs to the problem of proving his authenticity, Cosimo succeeds with bravura.

In the novellas, Calvino tries to find a walk of life or kind of work that seems worthy and meaningful. Each novella presents a different scene, and each scene is tried and discarded as not what he wants. *The Argentine Ant* portrays a struggle so all-consuming that it will undoubtedly give a sense of meaning, but only until characters realize the Kafkaesque bondage and Sisyphean meaninglessness of it all. Struggles devoted to survival do not allow expansive horizons. Hence, I suspect, Calvino decided against further stories of marginal existence. He leaves to other writers the stories of slum dwellers or of peasants eking out a living by scraping the hillsides.

With *A Plunge into Real Estate*, Calvino tries and discards literary treatment of contemporary business, economics, local party politics, and the mushrooming construction industry that has ravaged the natural beauty of Italy. He proved that he could indeed write effectively on such matters, but the obvious distastefulness and lack of meaning for the characters themselves bar that subject matter. *The Watcher* puts political action under close scrutiny and offers a weary assessment of its nearly hopeless shortcomings. Amerigo feels that such a life is only going through the motions, and bears no closer resemblance to a meaningful existence than do the lives of the asylum inmates. *Marcovaldo* shows the deceptions lurking beneath attractive surfaces both in the city and in more bucolic settings; nothing is what it seems. *Smog*

parades the inauthenticity of the ordinary person working meshed into a bureaucracy, a government of desks and memos, of public-relations releases and industrial production. Calvino was well able to show the inauthenticity, but in none of these does he get much beyond the negative. There are occasional flashes of hope—the sheets and traditional linen-washers at the end of *Smog*, the sense of living within a network of meshed lives at the end of *The Watcher*—but for the most part, Calvino finds nothing to redeem his dark vision of contemporary society. Hence, as a mindscape for the quest for meaning, such material would probably ensure failure. Because that is the world he lives in—the world of real estate and politics and industrial pollution—the meaning he seeks must be applicable there, but to find that meaning first, Calvino needs different perspectives than those available from the midst of industrial society. Like Cosimo, he needs distance.

The cosmicomical tales open a new landscape, and with that come new desires to be acted upon, new frustrations, and new subjects for conversation. Authenticity is no problem to Qfwfq. Each time he pursues one of his *innamorate*, he feels thoroughly engaged with life. We may wonder if these aren't triangular passions and therefore less than authentic, but young Qfwfq suffers no such doubts. However, he does have trouble with finding rules for relating to the universe. He measures life in terms of one thing, but his *innamorate* all want its opposite. Ayl wants colourlessness; L'll wants fishiness; Mrs Vhd Vhd wants Qfwfq's deaf cousin; Nugkta prefers 'nothing' to 'something', and so it goes. More than any previous character, Qfwfq thirsts for the wonders of the surrounding universe. He makes deductions and predictions and tries to understand his cosmos. From *Cosmicomics* on, Calvino's concerns seem much more those of meaning and metaphysics than of authenticity and professional life work.

To get some sense of how the later works differ from one another, and of how they deal with meaning, we can use A. J. Greimas's semiotic square. Greimas starts from the structuralist premiss that a text, like other cultural artifacts, grows out of a binary opposition operating at the level of deep structure. In Calvino's case, surface structures may concern tarot cards or real-estate speculation, but the basic binary oppositions within each of the novels are practically identical. The complete square consists of four terms or positions, and what Calvino does with the third and fourth significantly alters the value-structure of every novel.

The basic binary opposition occupies the positions labelled one and two. The first element however also logically generates a third as well, its contradictory, consisting of its own negation or absence. Likewise the second position generates its own absence or negation at position four. Greimas himself has modified his scheme at least once, and others

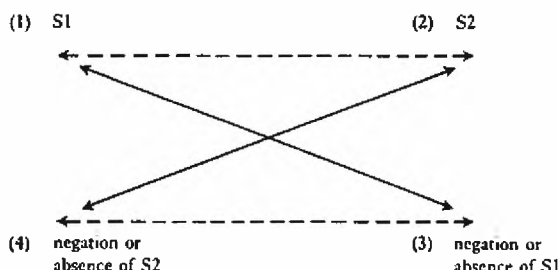


FIG. 1. Greimas's semiotic square

applying it to literature have generated variants.⁵ The version I offer here is the simpler of Greimas's structures, since it seems best to fit Calvino's writing. In most general terms, the square looks like the drawing in Fig. 1. S1 and S2 are the emotionally resonant binary oppositions that occur in many narratives: life versus death; action versus contemplation; or, in Calvino's case, cogito versus flux. S1 also generates a different kind of value, the contradiction of itself, sometimes interpreted as its own absence. Likewise, S2 may imply such a contradiction or absence. To uncover the dynamics of *Hard Times*, Fredric Jameson (1974: 167–8) sets up the initial opposition of facts (1) and imagination (2), and notes that when you negate or deny the importance of facts, you get sympathy (3). But what do you get by negating imagination? The answer is not immediately clear. Ultimately, he discovers the fourth term to be crime— theft, adultery (projected), and the betrayals (admittedly legal) perpetrated by a police informer. Jameson points out that with three values virtually given, a narrative is often a quest for the fourth, missing value (see Fig. 2.) The cosmicomic tales represent a textbook example of such relationships, and illustrate the elements at work in Calvino's thought that we have seen in previous chapters. The fourth term is indeed what Calvino and Qfwfq are seeking; 3 is the cogito swallowed by flux (Calvino's continuing fear) while 4 is the flux assimilated by (swallowed by) the cogito. We find a similar pattern in *The Baron in the Trees* (see Fig. 3.) Certainly once the basic tensions are established, the mystery is how Cosimo will avoid falling or descending in death, his will having proved sufficient to keep him elevated during life.

⁵ Greimas's own versions differ as follows: in the simpler, the third and fourth terms are contradictions of the first and second: A and B (first and second) versus non-A and non-B (third and fourth). However, in the more complicated square, he makes the third and fourth positions complex, position three being A plus B, while position four is non-A plus non-B or the absence of both. I find the simpler version of the square more useful for Calvino. For an exposition of both, see Ronald Schleifer's introduction to Greimas's *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. For some of Greimas's own applications, see Greimas and Rastier.

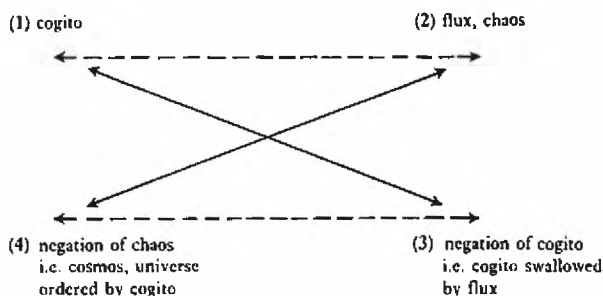
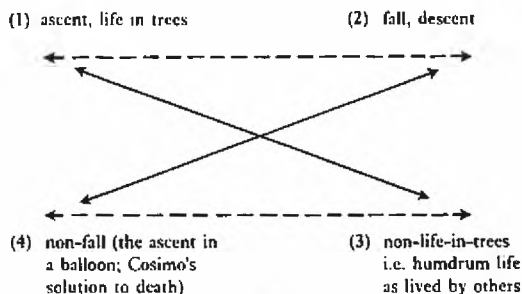


FIG. 2. The cosmicomical stories

The degree of meaning found in various novels correlates with the emphasis put upon element 3 or 4. Does the story give us images of assimilating the cosmos, or does it stress dissolving into flux? Sometimes Calvino alters the emotional tenor by reversing his usual values: dissolution seems at least partly desirable in 'Mitosis' and 'The Spiral' while triumphant prediction of the winning side brings no victory in 'Without Colors' and 'La Luna come un fungo'. Most of the cosmicomical tales show dissolution as a defeat, however, and many of them do show such defeat. In 'The Light-Years' the exploding universe finally puts Qfwfq beyond the point that he can repair the effects of a solecism, and all communication dissolves into the distances. In 'The Form of Space' a rip-roaring battle for the fair lady spreads to the thinness of a sheet of paper, the story becoming illegible black lines. Qfwfq becomes lost in a specular maze ('Games Without End') and in a maze of possible wagers ('How Much Shall We Bet?'). Such failures are often balanced by Qfwfq's forays into love, but none of the stories *end* with unalloyed triumph, with unqualified success in taming the universe with one's system of thought, even for that moment, unless one counts as triumph the maniac's murder at the end of 'La memoria del mondo'. However, the dissolutions rarely seem life-threatening, and they are seldom even deeply humiliating or frightening. In other words, position 4 is sought in

FIG. 3 *The Baron in the Trees*

these tales, but almost never achieved; position 3 is the option being explored, but not to the point that dissolution actually takes place in frightening ways. Communications may dissolve, but not Qfwfq himself. These stories seek 'fitting in' and meaning, but find the process of seeking itself engaging enough that the protagonist is not bothered by failures. Dedicating oneself to the quest for meaning is enough to give some sense of meaning.

Invisible Cities shows us crystalline cerebration, each description seemingly complete and perfect, and yet the italicized frame passages and several stories present us with aporias or gaps that the intellectual systems cannot cover over: the void not filled with words attaching to Marco Polo's descriptions (IIb); the city of death (IIIb); the admission that all the descriptions derive somewhat from Venice (VIa); the empty chess squares shown by Marco Polo to be so rich in information that they almost form a vortex or maze, sweeping us through to a different level of reality. These are but a few of the holes in the patterned sequence of cities.

Some of the serenity of *Invisible Cities* stems from the fact that the second position in the Greimas square, which ought to be a major opposition, is less threatening than usual. The empire is likened to a bog, a crumbling ruin, even to a mass of corruption, but none of these is treated as frightening. We do not sense that a failure on Marco Polo's part to describe a city will result in revolution, regicide, and slaughter of the emperor's ambassador. We do not even feel that the emperor is so arbitrary and fretful that he will execute his entertainer on whim or when irritated by a description. Furthermore, a great deal of the book is given over to the fourth position, the successful description of the cosmos. We may question what these descriptions would be useful for, but we relish the grandeur and eloquence of Marco Polo's travelogues, and agree that he has captured *something* emblematic, whatever the relationship to reality may be. At the very least, he succeeds as a verbal artificer and entertainer.

The third position in the Greimas square for this novel offers some interesting and disquieting but unthreatening versions of the non-cogito, of its absence. The two men imagine their own fictionality. They ponder whether they really exist as active men of war and trade, in which case their evening colloquy is but a dream. In Berkeleian fashion, they decide that the lower classes must exist because they themselves have thought of them, but wonder if perhaps they themselves do not exist because the lower classes have not pictured emperor and traveller together in the eventide. Another position 3 situation occurs when the Khan produces his magic atlas; the reality of the two men as historical figures is undercut when they pore over cities that will only appear in the future, or even that will appear in future fictions not yet written. By destabilizing

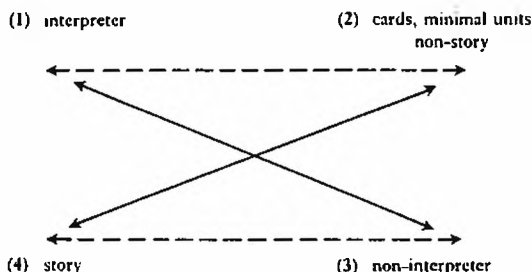
their ontology,⁶ the atlas renders the two characters less real (i.e. they cannot even be thought to represent the historical figures, a kind of absence).

The quest for meaning in this novel seems detached and distanced from desires and fears. Not only are the protagonists serene, but they even seem to enjoy their exploration of empire-as-cosmos. By envisioning older characters, Calvino has projected his quest beyond the tumult of the body and its urges, thus giving full attention to the mind. From what we are shown—admittedly little that has to do with actual governance of the empire—we see two men possessed of the inward civilization that comes from assimilating a wide range of microcosms. Such civilization allows them to see the aporias and gaps in their construction—the impossibility of ever really knowing the empire, and the unknowability of what Polo means with some of his emblems, for instance; at the same time that civilization permits them to remain undistressed by these failures of their system. The pleasures of assimilating and pondering, of comparing and extrapolating, of admiring and remembering, outweigh the uneasiness that their failures might otherwise have engendered. Calvino will return to such inward civilization later, but first he had to face directly the fear of dissolution. This he did in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, particularly in the morbid and melodramatic 'tavern' section.⁷

Calvino's quest for meaning made a major advance when he laid out the tarots. Up to that point, his protagonists flirted with dissolution, but never felt its full power; they tried means of fitting in, but found no lasting solutions. To break that stalemate, Calvino needed to expose and explore this anxiety triggered by engulfment. In Orphic terms, he has to face the underworld. The cosmicomical tales record the loss of numerous Eurydices; the poet should therefore descend in order to regain them. Various European Orphic writers such as Nerval, Mallarmé, and Rilke all take the plunge. They do not win back what they have lost, but do return with a certain authentication of personal vision or clarification of poetic mission. Calvino does not make this book overtly Orphic, but one notes with interest that several of the narrators are apparently dead; as they tell their tales, we realize that the final adventure led to their deaths, so that the mysterious castle and tavern are somewhere beyond the realm of ordinary life, even if not officially a land of the dead. Furthermore, as if the second phase of the Orphic legend (descent) were being conflated

⁶ Brian McHale makes this the prime characteristic of postmodernism; postmodernist texts ask ontological questions, modernist texts, epistemological questions.

⁷ Chronology cannot be translated directly into development at this juncture in Calvino's work. The 'castle' section of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* was published in 1969, before *Invisible Cities* (1972), but the longer version that includes the 'tavern' section was published in 1973. Tarot cards and cities seem to have occupied Calvino's mind simultaneously, and the chronology that I impose here is the somewhat arbitrary one of the publication dates associated with the novel versions of those works.

FIG. 4. *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*

with the third (dismemberment), we find repeated dismemberments in the tarot tales.

Since Calvino's obsession with dissolution continues to the end of his works, one cannot say that the plunge reshaped his consciousness entirely. Nor does he give us any obvious happy ending or Eurydice reclaimed. However, the sunniness of *If on a winter's night a traveler* and the understated humour of *Mr. Palomar* suggest that some tension was resolved, some anxiety lessened by this plunge. What then was gained? What happened in the quest for meaning?

Let us look at this in the Greimasian form of Fig. 4. The first position, represented by the character of the narrator who also stands in for the reader, is as usual the intelligence trying to make sense of the particles. The second position is taken by the cards, enigmatic and resistant to stable interpretation. Interpreted to the narrator's satisfaction, they make up story, an ordering of the units of this cosmos. The third position, marked by absence of the interpreter, appears in several forms. One is simply the failure to interpret with sufficient assurance as to constitute success. Much of the anxiety present in this novel is expressed in that fashion. However, Calvino gives us three other versions of negating the interpreter, all in the same passage toward the end of the 'castle' section. The narrator finds himself missing when he tries to locate his own story among the cards and fails because it is lost in a 'pulviscolo' of stories.

He is missing in a yet more radical fashion in a pair of parallel images, one just prior to and one just following upon this loss of self. In the prior disappearance, the narrator sees the Goddess of Destruction who shuffles cards and souls, bodies and particles of dust. In the later passage, the cards are being laid out by their hostess. What starts as her trying to tell her tale, however, undergoes a strange metamorphosis. The guests and narrator disappear; she is just a wife waiting for her husband to return, and she lays out the card formations we have just seen to while time away.

In these strange visions of women shuffling the cards, the narrator dis-

covers that there are forces behind those card sequences that had nothing to do with story-telling. Those female forces determine the laying down of the cards, and in doing so, erase the narratives' status as personal stories. The female forces also lessen the fictive reality of the travellers who laid out the cards. The narrator finds himself superfluous. If the card sequences are thus these women's games of solitaire, what need is there for someone to turn them into story? The absence or negation of the cogito (position 3) thus works itself out in different fashions. In the case of these two alternative sources for the card sequences, we find that interpretation (and by extrapolation, criticism) is unnecessary. Some force will generate story. The pleasure of reading will still remain, even if stable interpretation is impossible.

Many of these stories end in dismemberment, madness, and death, making this by far Calvino's darkest symbolic world. He mentions inferno at the end of *Invisible Cities*, but *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* reeks of the Dantesque underworld. In assessing the progress of Calvino's quest, we need to understand why this set of minimal units should prove so threatening. We might also wonder why this is the cosmos into which he chose to plunge and brave the threat of dissolution and dismemberment and madness.

I suggest that this manifestation of cosmos was appropriate for facing his deep anxiety because it is the world of literature. As author, Calvino cares about literature being understood. While he was writing, however, the world was echoing with Barthesian whispers that the author is dead. Deconstructions of literary meaning were becoming commonplace. As an author, one who believes in language as communication and reading as knowledge, Calvino needed here, if anywhere, to find a system that would make sense of experience, a way of discovering meaning. In this novel he bravely faces the weakness of our interpretive strategies, and shows how they lead to one abyss after another—death, madness, dismemberment, and deconstruction. Moreover, Calvino also faces the threat that his own work will sink into the great European river of print without trace. Little wonder that the timbre of this novel is so shockingly dark. Calvino exposes himself as author to muteness, to his giant predecessors, and to plots that involve 'great' themes. We derive little reassurance from this novel—and yet those that follow are sunnier and lighter. So what did he retrieve from this underworld, this inferno of literary fears?

Fecundity of creation is one reassurance salvaged from the dark forest. Calvino carelessly strews possible means of generating further stories: linking famous paintings and using comic strips. In his 1967 essay, 'Cybernetics and Ghosts', Calvino rhetorically asks himself how he feels at discovering that narrative derives from combining a limited number of elements, and answers,

what I instinctively feel is a sense of relief, of security. The same sort of relief and sense of security that I feel every time I discover that a mess of vague and indeterminate lines turns out to be a precise geometric form; or every time I succeed in discerning a series of facts, and choices to be made out of a finite number of possibilities, in the otherwise shapeless avalanche of events. Faced with the vertigo of what is countless, unclassifiable, in a state of flux, I feel reassured by what is finite, 'discrete,' and reduced to a system. (*The Uses of Literature*, 17)

ciò che io provo istintivamente è un senso di sollievo, di sicurezza. Lo stesso sollievo e senso di sicurezza che provo ogni volta che un'estensione dai contorni indeterminati e sfumati mi si rivela invece come una forma geometrica precisa, ogni volta che in una valanga informe di avvenimenti riesco a distinguere delle serie di fatti, delle scelte tra un numero finito di possibilità. Di fronte alla vertigine dell'innunerevole, dell'inclassificabile, del continuo, mi sento rassicurato dal finito, dal sistematizzato, dal discreto. (*Una pietra sopra*, 173-4)

That reassurance lets him affirm that literature can and will go on, no matter what problems we may have with interpretation.

Another reassurance is the continued desire to read. Travellers wish to tell their tales and others wish to hear or read them. Whatever literature may be, and whatever intellectual system proves able to describe literature's workings, the crucial experience is not formal interpretation. What matters may not even reside in understanding, but rather in desires gratified, in pleasure, in curiosity, in mystery, in the need we feel to try to interpret. Through all of these interactions between reader and text, literature can create an intense if momentary engagement. Such engagement temporarily gives us a sense of meaning or at least relieves us from feeling the lack thereof. These discoveries seem to be the largely hidden treasure recovered with the plunge, because *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a light-hearted celebration of our marriage to the pleasure of reading.

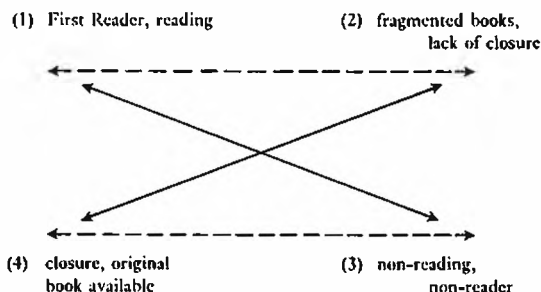


FIG. 5. *If on a winter's night a traveler*

The Greimas diagram (Fig. 5) for *If on a winter's night a traveler* looks familiar. The Reader is our primary representative of the cogito, the consciousness around which this novel swirls. (The second Reader seems

less involved in binary opposition; she pursues and enjoys, but seems less bent upon struggle.) The Reader is frustrated by the truncated books and their lack of closure, and he puts a great deal of effort into achieving closure. His mental struggles and emotional anxieties actually operate on three levels: he strives to reach closure in his reading; he strives for consummation and ultimately marriage in his relationship with Ludmilla; and as a reader, he suffers a certain identification with the protagonists of the novels, and so with them feels the pressure of being victim of sinister plots. We, as outside readers, also know the degree to which he is victim of Italo Calvino's plot, since Calvino exposes him to and then robs him of texts supposedly by Bazakbal, Ahti, Ikoka, and others.

The fourth position, which usually stands for the cogito successfully assimilating the cosmos, ordering it through systematic thought, and for fitting in, proves in this novel to be represented with unusual clarity. The Reader achieves his marriage to Ludmilla, and at the end, as they read in bed, he finishes Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*—thus creating an interesting 'strange loop'. Given these traditional symbols of closure, the book is at least superficially the most cheerful of Calvino's creations.

The third position corresponds to non-Reader or absence of Reader or Reader being unable to function as reader; these Calvino represents very inventively. Books are made unreadable by gluing their pages together and forming them into avant-garde sculpture. We find books and hence reading them banned by police states. The Reader could cease to be a reader by giving up on the quest for a complete copy of his book. One can be a non-reader like Imerio, or in the fashion of Lotaria. She is a Critic-with-a-capital-C, and submits books to computer analysis. As Calvino shows in one of the later adventures, texts within a computer become unreadable when something goes wrong with the program: the computer spews forth a frequency word list of 'the's' and 'from's' and 'that's' while simultaneously erasing the original (and only) version of the text. The Reader may be rendered absent by being rubbed out—first figuratively, through identification with the protagonists in the incipits, but then the threat becomes real enough when he visits a dictatorship. The Reader may also be rendered absent within the courtship plot, for Ludmilla at various times seems to lose interest in him and favour Imerio or Silas Flannery. These many threats to negate the reader or Reader give the novel much of its urgency and sparkle. Without them, the romance would assume too central a position, and we might incline to force its conventional frame to bear more weight than it was designed for.

Whereas *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* caused us to experience reading anxieties, *If on a winter's night a traveler* suggests that the satisfactions of reading soothe one, and relieve the pressure to come up with a grand theory of meaning in life. Finishing a gripping book is

likened to consummating a sexual attraction, and when entranced, we feel little need for a philosophy. Since the range and number of books available far exceeds the grasp of any individual, this form of ordering experience is generally available. One is absorbing or assimilating books rather than the universe at large, but that act of replication or doubling is better than none. We still relate, by means of congruence or likeness, to something outside ourselves, creating a microcosm in our mind (our memories of the story) to match the macrocosm of the text and ultimately the literary tradition. Such doubling gives a provisional sense of meaning, meaning at least for the duration of the reading experience. Meaning some of the time thus exists, and is on tap when wanted.

As of this point in his career, then, Calvino had finally faced his anxiety and reached some insight. He found no guarantee of meaning, but did find reassurance that the urges to produce and assimilate stories would continue, no matter what philosophical barriers to interpretation might in theory exist. Having found this much, he was able to relax and celebrate the human marriage to books and explore the ways in which it gives a limited sense of meaning. He makes no grand claims for that meaning, except for the happiness it can give. In these two novels Calvino established some relatively firm ground from which to launch new explorations.

With both *Mr. Palomar* and 'Under the Jaguar Sun' Calvino appears to have decided to take the plunge again, and test himself against another form of dissolution, death. In *Mr. Palomar* the protagonist projects himself into death via various moods of gaiety and grumpiness, and through the death not only of himself but of life on earth and even of life anywhere in the universe, when all will be extinguished in a flash of heat or crystallize into frozen orderliness. Palomar dies, apparently happy at having found a solution of sorts: describe each moment to himself as he lives it. Each description takes much longer than a moment, expands indefinitely, in fact, as Calvino once showed with his analysis in 'Exactitude' of Leonardo's three versions of the fable of fire and water. By describing all the instants he experiences, he will be unable to brood on death—at which point, he dies. The narrative does not provide a sense of meaning by showing Palomar ameliorate his alienation; his quirky, disenchanted personality clings to him beyond the imagined grave, and he cannot mend the flaw in his feeling of continuity with the universe. However, by mirroring each moment with words he creates a doubling structure, a cosmetic emblem relating himself to the larger cosmos. Now the very lack of exact match—the words take so much longer than the instant itself—becomes an advantage. The imperfection keeps his cogito at work, and such work separates it from the encroaching paste.

In 'Under the Jaguar Sun' Calvino faces his fundamental anxiety in its most basic and most infantile oral-stage form: the fear of being eaten. He

manages to envision a fantasy of being eaten and yet surviving the ordeal; in good psychological parallel, he also survives the attempt of the Mayan priest-king to kill him. The man-eating giant or ogre of fairy tales is just such a father-figure as the priest-king.

The suave, sometimes wry, tone of these musings does not make the story stand out as a grand escape from anxieties or psychic breakthrough, but we find a new factor at work, a companion of long standing who supplies stability and mental stimulation. With her to construct links to the outside world, the narrator can chase down his symbolic anxieties in relative tranquillity. The quest for meaning or for escape from the anxieties remains, but the urgency and alarm are muted, this time by a personal relationship rather than the help of books.

Where Calvino might have headed from here is not predictable. The other two stories about the senses do not feature long-time companions. Neither do the Casanova accounts. 'Under the Jaguar Sun' may document an *ad hoc* means of bracing his imagination for the plunge, or the beginning of something relatively new, exploration of female companionship. Such partners were present but far less significant in the cosmicomical tales and *If on a winter's night a traveler*. We have only one other clue to future developments, or at least to new ways in which Calvino's mind was working. That is the series of Norton lectures. If I may return to the parallels between his development as writer and the Orphic tradition as suggested by *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, we have in those lectures an analogue to the fourth Orphic phase. After charming animals, descending into the underworld, and suffering the *sparagmos* or dismemberment comes prophecy. Orpheus's head and lyre float down the river and across the sea to an island, where the head serves as an oracle until silenced by Apollo. In *Six Memos* we find something rather like a prophetic strain. Calvino is rescuing from the past some wisdom he wants saved, and he is warning the future to cherish these fugitive, overlooked values.

Calvino's quest for meaning, in sum, is not entirely unsuccessful. He eventually faces the anxiety originating within the fantastic structures of his imagination with enough directness to lessen the grip of that anxiety. He finds that local systems for giving meaning—reading, companionship—can reduce if not eliminate the craving for grander systems that would link him to the cosmos. By *Mr. Palomar* he had achieved enough detachment from the urgency of the quest to laugh at the habit of mind that generates it. The quest continues to the end, and Calvino is no closer to offering a programme or a guarantee of happiness or a formula for finding meaning. Indeed, as I shall argue in the next section, his ultimate wariness about programmes made him realize that there can be no general pattern for finding meaning. Any possible resolution to his quest would have to be individual. He does not, though, give up seeking, and

in the later works he pursues his goals with more sunniness, with somewhat more relaxation, and with more evident enjoyment in creating the microcosmic emblems that link him to the macrocosm.

The Opposition to Tyranny

Calvino's imaginative structures drove him to image his desire in terms of pattern to be imposed upon flux—a problematic combination. The nature of flux makes geometrical order at best a limited tool. Furthermore, Calvino was able to see the dark and threatening side of such rigid system: tyranny. He associates the entropic heat death of the universe with crystal coldness. He shows Qfwfq resenting the pressures to conform to neatness and pyramids in 'I meteoriti'. Had Qfwfq's party of the crystals won in 'Crystals', life as we know it would never have appeared. In *I zero* Calvino quotes the marvellous comment from Galileo to the effect that we are far better off with a maculate, imperfect, and mutable world than we would be if the world were pure and flawless diamond. These are only a few of the places that Calvino admits the dangers of his passion for orderly patterns.

The lover of symmetries might be expected to think in utopian terms, and mention of one sort of utopia or another is fairly common in Calvino, but what we find instead of utopias is the steadfast questioning of their means and ideals, and their rejection. Torrismund, in *The Nonexistent Knight*, experiences the society of Grail Knights not as the utopia and ideal brotherhood they assert it to be, but as a fraud and tyranny, and he turns against them. Cosimo denies the Enlightenment ideal represented by his class and its decorum. Amerigo cannot bring himself to affirm the utopian possibilities in Communism; he feels that the sacred fire had indeed burned in Italy just after the war, but that it has since been smothered by bureaucracy. He cringes at all forms of tyranny: the priests and nuns pressure the inmates to vote in one fashion; the political parties woo voters or flaunt their power by disqualifying presumed incompetents.

Resistance to all such pressure and resentment felt towards it characterize Calvino texts. In 'La strada di San Giovanni' the speaking voice, apparently Calvino's own, resists the orderly, purposeful life of his father, with its flow of botanical knowledge and long hikes up the hill. Calvino still feels the need to fend off that pressure, to give fantastic names to plants rather than look up the true names in a gesture of filial piety. In 'Autobiography of a Spectator' he resents the effect of Fascist censorship on the films that enriched his adolescence. The opposition to tyranny is expressed in fantastic terms in 'La decapitazione dei Capi', where he imagines a utopia of sorts, a realm in which rulers are all eventually executed.

Calvino's later works show a good deal of sensitivity on the issue of imposing order on others, and hence tyrannizing over them. Palomar gives up models when he sees their relationship to power. Calvino even shows Casanova learning not to impose patterns on others. In *'Le memorie di Casanova'*, Casanova has simultaneous lovers, Cate and Ilda, one of whom visits in the morning, the other in the afternoon.

In the beginning, I thought (I was, as will be understood, very young and I was trying to carry out an experiment) that amorous knowledge could be transferred from one to the other: both of them knew much more than I did and I thought that the secret arts learned from Ilda I could teach to Cate and vice versa. But I was mistaken and all I did was botch that which is worthwhile only when it is spontaneous and immediate. Each one was a world unto herself, or rather each a sky in which I should have traced the positions of stars and planets, orbits, eclipses, inclinations and conjunctions, solstices and equinoxes. Each firmament moved according to a different mechanism and different rhythm. I should not have tried to apply to the sky of Ilda the astronomical notions which I had learned by observing the sky of Cate.

Al principio credevo (ero, come si sarà capito, molto giovane, e cercavo di farmi un'esperienza) che il sapere amoroso fosse trasmissibile dall'una all'altra: entrambe ne sapevano molto più di me e io pensavo che le arti segrete che apprendevo da Ilda potessi insegnarle a Cate, e viceversa. M'ingannavo: non facevo che ingarbugliare ciò che vale solo quand'è spontaneo e diretto. Erano ognuna un mondo a sè, anzi ognuna un cielo in cui dovevo rintracciare posizioni di stelle e di pianeti, orbite, eclissi, inclinazioni e congiunzioni, solstizi ed equinozi. Ogni firmamento si muoveva secondo un diverso meccanismo e un diverso ritmo. Non potevo pretendere d'applicare al cielo d'Ilda le nozioni d'astronomia che avevo imparato osservando il cielo di Cate. (p. 15)

Casanova even learns that with two such different mistresses, he must recount his social doings in entirely different fashions, and he cultivates this split habit of mind so assiduously, viewing every social event from the two perspectives, that it drives him to leave town, exhausted by the effort. Note how Calvino's cosmic vision is manifested through Casanova, who links himself to the universe by envisioning each woman as a separate cosmos with its own constellations and planets. The seductions of Calvino's Casanova grow from a context of patriarchal assumptions, and he cannot be absolved of exploitation, but in this five-part fragment, Casanova does acknowledge diversity. Not to do so would be a kind of tyranny, and likely to lead to failures.

Calvino's fantasy structures lead him to a bind: he desires to impose order—on flux and by extension, anything else—but he does not wish to have someone else's order imposed upon himself. This set of impulses might have worked out in unattractive ways. Calvino could have taken the tyrant's way out, and fought to impose order on anything and everyone, fending off the order of others by proving himself more

aggressive.⁸ Obviously he did not choose the way of force to gratify them; he was fully aware of their potential for tyranny and avoided the tyrannous as much as possible. He carefully refuses to apply his systems beyond the point that they seem to fit, giving up rather than forcing the issue. Calvino even avoids the standard, respectable pattern for inheriting power over others: submit to the Symbolic Father, the patriarchal structures, and in turn (if male) you will rise to eminence within that system. Calvino does not submit to the patterns of others—be they paternal botany, the Communist Party, or genre expectations. Likewise, his characters refuse the patterns handed to them by party or class or history. They seek their own.

Had Calvino called more attention to his refusing power over others, critics might have responded more positively to the philosophy projected in his later works. 'Inward civilization' as a goal sounds solipsistic and self-centred, even selfish. If we remember that it is premised upon the relinquishing of power over others, and yet is not just submission to the will of others, then the potentiality of what Calvino was exploring might have been clearer.

Inward Civilization

What do you do if 'meaning' proves impossible for you, whether because your temperament does not permit you to accept the answers of others or answers demanding faith? What if the structures you have found for ordering flux prove insufficient to create a lasting and rational continuity between yourself and the cosmos? What if the only meanings that seem to stand up are ephemeral and limited, as is the sense of purpose one feels while reading, or the relatedness to the universe one may feel through partnership with a sympathetic companion?

Before listing what seem to me to be the elements in Calvino's answers to these questions, let me sidetrack to Paul Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, a strong precursor text to *Mr. Palomar*, and one whose protagonist has much in common both with Calvino and Palomar. A few important quotations from *Monsieur Teste* cast light on Calvino's endeavour.⁹

I [Teste] am not made for novels or plays. Their great scenes, rages, passions, and tragic moments, far from stirring me, reach me only as rather dim lights, or as

⁸ One notes that the basic elements in Calvino's fantasies, the associations of women with flux and flux with dissolution of self, appear prominently in Klaus Theweleit's study of the psychology of German Fascism and of Hitler's SA. Theweleit's study suggests that violent or tyrannical solutions for such anxieties are all too common. See Theweleit (1987), *Male Fantasies*, vol. i. For more on tyranny and the senses in Calvino, see Hume (1992b).

⁹ I am quoting from the 1947 translation by Jackson Mathews. The original novel was published in 1946, but augmented in 1947, and the translation is of the augmented edition, which includes extracts from notes Valéry had compiled towards a new version of *Monsieur Teste*.

rudimentary situations in which every sort of silliness is let loose, in which being is simplified even to stupidity . . . (p. 41)

Here we see a parallel to Calvino's conviction that literature should de-dramatize life, not exaggerate and intensify its unruly emotions.

The mind must not be concerned with persons. (p. 88)

Teste's rejection of individuals resembles Calvino's resistance to psychology and interiority for his characters.

One of Teste's pet notions, and not his least fanciful, was wanting to keep art—*Ars*—and yet do away with the artist's or author's illusions. . . . He insisted that a clear idea of what you are doing will give much more surprising and universal results than all the nonsense about inspiration, characters *true to life*, etc. . . . If Bach had believed the spheres were dictating his music, he would not have had the power of limpidity and the sovereign control of transparent combinations that he had. (p. 83)

Teste shares Calvino's allegiance to conscious and deliberate pattern rather than to inspiration or realism or to a transcendent reality.

Monsieur Teste wonders at the moment of death if 'I shall have that important moment—perhaps I shall behold the entire sum of myself in one terrible flash. . . . Not possible' (p. 94). Palomar, too, hopes that some moment, even that of death, will somehow answer the question of meaning. As consciousness fades, Teste recognizes that no such answer will be divulged, and Calvino grants Palomar no better success.

With these Calvinian situations and attitudes in mind, we reach the quotation that made me see Calvino in a different light. Monsieur Teste had come to that point of *inner civilization* where consciousness no longer allows an opinion to go unaccompanied by its procession of modalities, and finds repose (if this *is* repose) only in the awareness of its own wonders, its own practices, substitutions, and innumerable precisions. (p. 47)

Inner or inward civilization (*civilisation intérieure*) is the best rubric I have found for describing what Calvino seems to subscribe to as answer to his quest for meaning, and as bulwark against dissolution. Moreover, the self-consciousness described as attendant on such inner development in *Monsieur Teste* resembles the cautious self-evaluations seen in *Mr. Palomar* and 'Under the Jaguar Sun'.

What inward civilization assumes and demands of us is not popular in the current climate of thought. It assumes that the individual is not going to be able to make vast changes in the world, and indeed that the individual should not wish to; vast changes tear the fragile fabric of social life but cannot guarantee that the replacement is better. Trying to make global changes, Calvino says in the Luca Fontana interview, has led to disasters in this century, and he prefers reforms and slow changes to revolutions. Readers will call this assumption 'mature' or 'defeatist',

depending on their material circumstances, their politics, and possibly on their age.

Given the limited effect of the individual, this inward civilization can afford to ignore human time, and since change is marginalized, so is character. What a person is may even seem a given—a pattern fixed in childhood. Calvino might not have chosen to be haunted by the particular fantasy structures of oral engulfment that he was, but being apparently stuck with them, he faced them and worked with and through them. He creates out of what he has, and so do his characters.

Calvino values attentiveness. In 'Preface—Story' the narrator enters his shower with a casual assumption of mastery over the water, but as he analyses the presuppositions lying behind the act of turning the knob, he reorients himself toward that simple act, and forgoes tyranny even if exerted only over water in favour of appreciation and thoughtful understanding.

He also prefers de-dramatized relationships that keep emotions well in hand. Palomar bites his tongue rather than give a hasty reaction that will probably be thought better of by his more civilized self. In *Six Memos* Calvino's respect for lightness and quickness make him prefer arguments that convince through their utter rightness and precision rather than through their use of emotions like guilt or nostalgia. One should be silent until one can produce the perfect argument—like the Chinese philosopher who studies ten years before producing the perfect drawing of a crab with a single brushstroke ('Quickness').

Calvino also values honesty. He tries one system after another for explaining and ordering flux, but avoids imposing any system further than it seems to go naturally. Nor does he pretend that his systems give him happiness or satisfaction. Palomar as *alter ego* is irritable and anxious, even though watching waves with a different outlook might soothe the psyche.

Calvino's answer demands that we take responsibility for constructing our own inward civilization; we are responsible for ourselves, not for others. Only we can judge what patterns fit our needs; only we can minister to those needs. To impose our patterns on others would be an illegitimate attempt to colonize those others and subordinate them.

To construct such inward civilization, we follow a pattern of the sort developed by Rilke in his Orphic theories. The Orphic poet must assemble the shards of experience and piece them together in his inner space or *Weltinnenraum*. One constructs the cosmos inside one's own consciousness. The function of the poet, symbolized for Rilke by Orpheus, is to put such fragments together. The greater the wealth of fragments one deals with, the potentially richer the mind and ultimate poetic product.¹⁰ In this aesthetic, we see an analogue to Calvino's many

¹⁰ For a discussion of Rilke's Orphic theories of assimilating experience, see Walter A. Strauss, ch. 5 on Rilke. The theory of art that expresses itself in Rilke's Orphism may have

doubling structures and to his passion for building mental models. One creates that interior microcosmos as emblem and cosmetic echo of the macrocosmos. The closer one's models to the original, and the richer one's array of models, pictures, and *riscritture*, the more complex and rewarding one's inward civilization will be. One's mind becomes a gallery or library. *Invisible Cities* is a gallery of inhabited pictures; *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* is a library of lived literature.¹¹ Toward the end of *If on a winter's night a traveler*, the protagonist comes at last to a great library, true home for the questing spirit. In *Eremita a Parigi*, Calvino talks of his room for writing as one filled with his books because they form 'a kind of interior space' ('una specie di spazio interiore') (p. 14), and he needs such a room because he identifies himself with his ideal library. Again, he wants to bear the emblem of his cosmos. Having established this productive space, Calvino goes on to talk about Paris as 'una gigantesca opera di consultazione' (p. 16) ('a giant reference work') like an encyclopedia. Paris, 'la città della maturità' (p. 22) is not so much a world to explore as a hyper-book in which to look things up.

For Calvino, the final step beyond furnishing the interior space with the artifacts of civilization, is to draw upon them for one's behaviour and, in his own case, for writing. Because he died before developing this line of thought in detail, we have only hints of how inward civilization applies to everyday life. Many of Calvino's essays in *Una pietra sopra* and *The Uses of Literature* and *Collezione di sabbia* show a mind drawing connections between something that has been observed and internalized—the classics, for instance—and subsequent relationships between one's consciousness and external life. One must study carefully, attentive to nuance, alert to antitheses and implications. Whatever one thus studies, be it literature or history or science, can change consciousness, can make one's mind more sensitive to the problems it faces and more careful not to nurture tyrannical attitudes. Calvino offers no programmes, but evidently felt that interior civilization of individuals would have an ameliorating effect on society.

In his own instance, he bridges the gap between the inward gallery and life by writing. Having assembled a rich array of images, he composes by consulting them. As he says of Paris, he can confront all its givens, combine them, transmit them, and even enjoy them. So too he combines elements from his inner collection, uses its images and patterns to try to map the labyrinth and model the flux. One hopes he sometimes enjoyed the process. Calvino speaks eloquently at times of the pains of writing,

had some indirect influence on Bisicchia (p. 91), when he points out that Calvino makes the universe the centre of man rather than man the centre of the universe.

¹¹ Simonetta Noé (1982) argues that textual space becomes equivalent to mental, and behind the images of the cities, the chessboard, or the Khan's garden, we can recognize the metaphoric representation of the mind's space where everything comes together and integrates (pp. 91–2).

but somewhere there must also have been satisfactions to balance them, for he continued to write and did not just withdraw to the more passive pursuit of his own pleasure in reading.

One of our pleasures in reading avant-garde writers comes from their giving us new ways of relating to the literary tradition. When we look at Calvino against that tradition, we see his newness in part through what he dares to do without. He denies himself the functional humanized universe that supplies the texture and orientation of fiction as we are used to it. We find little or nothing to do with material artifacts, religion, wealth, social success, family, community, sex, love, action, or suspense. He avoids most traditional literary structures; we find attenuated hero monomyths on occasion, but except for such pale romances, we find no tragedies, not even the ironic structures found in Kafka, with their visions of Sisyphean bondage. Character, history, and development are irrelevant in this vision. So are those distinguishing features of other recent avant-garde writing—the dizzying fragmentation, the magic realism, the verbal pyrotechnics. Calvino is clear, easy to read, elegant, and funny. His universes are what differentiate his writing from the norms—a step much more daring than mere stylistic experimentation.

What he gives us is the cogito facing the cosmos in a civilized fashion, civilization being defined for Calvino by the use of reason, by emotional restraint, by self-creation, and by refraining from tyranny over others. He is dazzlingly inventive in finding ways to view this basic confrontation, and hence of giving us ways to interiorize this archetypal act. He helps us accumulate our own interior library or gallery of satisfying images, some one of which may prove peculiarly suited to helping us face that same confrontation at one time or other in our lives. The power of literature to give such images is something Calvino calls to our attention in his Norton lecture on visibility. In helping us amass such images, he encourages our own ability to build emblematic ties between ourselves and the cosmos around us.

I have talked about Calvino's endeavour in terms of creating an inner cosmos, of creating emblematic likenesses that help join one to the universe, or of building bridges, links, networks. Let us take *Mr. Palomar*, his last completed work, and see how he shows his quesser creating such interior images and using them.

In 'The sword of the sun' Palomar swims toward the setting sun and feels a personal tie being established between himself and that sun by the lance of light that points directly from it to him, a line joining him to the physical cosmos. He views this from three vantage points: the sun is paying him homage; everyone swimming toward the occident similarly receives the sun's accolade; and his own doubled response tells him that

he is a thinking subject (a cogito) able to interpret his experiences. Whimsy, logic, and self-consciousness thus intertwine.

Palomar specifically creates a mirror or cosmetic double when he assimilates the experience to his interior mental space. This he does by recognizing the physiology of thought and experience: what he experiences is really happening in the synapses inside his brain. Hence he is swimming inside his own head. Paradoxes proliferate: his seeing the sun as outside of himself also confirms that he is outside of it because he can only know its shining inside his mind. He also develops a whimsically Berkeleian sense of responsibility toward that solar sword; he must stay because if he turns his back, it will cease to exist. It appeals to him because it is a 'ponte marino', a fragile marine bridge between his eye and the sun, and bridges are important in Calvino's symbolic idiolect.

He searches for the system that explains it all:

What a relief it would be if he could manage to cancel his partial and doubting ego in the certitude of a principle from which everything is derived! (p. 16)

Che sollievo se riuscisse ad annullare il suo io parziale e dubbioso nella certezza d'un principio da cui tutto deriva! (p. 18)

Lacking the key to transcendent meaning, he tries to locate himself among the chemical elements, and then within force-fields and vectors. Palomar thus soars outwards into the cosmos of physics, the starting point of Calvino's cosmic vision, and then dives back to contemplate the human garbage that floats in the water and scums the beach. Such repellent items and their threat to the ecosystem lead him to thoughts of the destruction of all earthly life, and to images of his own death—apocalyptic engulfment of the sort first developed in *Invisible Cities*.

Having mentally abolished all life on earth, Palomar proceeds to recreate it; with echoes of 'The Spiral', the first eye emerges from a pristine ocean and sees the sun's sword. He realizes that the blade cannot exist without an eye, and we note his care to try various interpretations of this fact:

and perhaps it was not the birth of the eye that caused the birth of the sword, but vice versa, because the sword had to have an eye to observe it at its climax. (p. 18)

e forse non la nascita dell'occhio ha fatto nascere la spada ma viceversa, perché la spada non poteva fare a meno d'un occhio che la guardasse al suo vertice. (p. 20)

Or, as Calvino puts it in 'The world looks at the world', the world needs the eyes of Palomar.

Calvino reached much the same emotional conclusion in the cosmical tales. Qfwfq, being younger in spirit, made love to his universe,

whereas Palomar observes his. In either case, however, the magnificence of the macrocosm that Calvino hymns with such loving attention would exist in vain were it not for the Cartesian cogito possessed of cosmic vision. Consciousness is an addition to the universe, for without it, all that splendour would be deaf and dumb and blind.

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